

Interpretation

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Liberating Discourse: The Politics of Truth in Plato's *Gorgias*

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And not only Aristotle but the whole of Greek antiquity thinks differently from us about hatred and envy, and judges with Hesiod, who in one place calls one Eris evil—namely, the one that leads men into hostile fights of annihilation—while praising another Eris as good—the one that, as jealousy, hatred, envy, spurs men to activity; not to the activity of fights of annihilation but to the activity of fights that are *contests*.

Nietzsche

We are subjected to the production of truths through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.

Foucault

According to Diogenes Laertius and the medieval manuscript tradition, Plato's *Gorgias* bears the subtitle "or on rhetoric" (*e peri rhetorike*), a perhaps all too obvious designation that arises out of the initial question "What is rhetoric?" posed by Socrates to Gorgias.¹ Modern critics allow the formal correctness of this designation but deny its adequacy as a description of the dialogue's scope or purpose. This is a preliminary question about the function of rhetoric, they argue, not the subject of the dialogue. The main themes emerge gradually in the course of the conversation: the problem of justice, the question of whether it is better to do injustice or suffer it, and the value of the philosophical over the political life. The topic of rhetoric would seem incidental, then, to these more weighty issues. The subject matter here is the moral basis of politics—the dialogue is centrally concerned with how one ought to live—not the rhetor's craft.²

But rhetoric has experienced a revival of late, and perhaps this renewed interest helps reveal a dimension of the dialogue previously elided. For contemporary philosophers and literary theorists the rhetorical turn is not incidental to the pressing questions of power and morality, but involves them directly. Consider Foucault's redeployment of the sophists, Derrida's engagement with Plato's *Phaedrus*, Lyotard's appropriation of the "pagan" philosophy of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* or Habermas's defense of an antirhetorical discourse ethic. For Foucault, the sophists and rhetors reveal the will to power behind the pretensions of the philosophers, while for Derrida, rhetoric provides the necessary

tools to unmask the origins and practices of Western logocentrism. Lyotard relies on the *Rhetoric* to debunk claims that “the political can be derived from the theoretical”³ and Habermas appropriates the tradition of civic virtue that reaches back to Aristotelian deliberation and Socratic dialogue in his formulation of a communicative ethics. While I do not want to deny that the *Gorgias* is about “how one ought to live,” especially since I will take up the issue of power and morality as a central theme in the dialogue, my own purposes are best, and most interestingly, served by paying attention to what has passed as the obvious: that the *Gorgias* is about rhetoric, and that rhetoric matters. I think that the dialogue acknowledges the force and importance of rhetoric, as do these contemporary theorists. What better text, then, to illuminate the present controversy over truth’s relationship to power than Plato’s *Gorgias*?

In that dispute, Habermas and Foucault offer us a choice between deriving norms communicatively or imposing them politically, between achieving consensus cooperatively or vanquishing an opponent strategically, between assenting to the “unforced force of the better argument” or winning that argument in order to dominate the conversation and others. Where Habermas reckons that “reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech,” Foucault argues that truth is produced through multiple forms of constraint and dismisses the project of dissolving relations of power in a “utopia of perfectly transparent communication.”⁴ Put as a question, the opposition between Habermas and Foucault reads something like this: “Can we fix the limits to the rights of power, or does power implement the rules of right by which we live?”

But perhaps this opposition is somewhat overdrawn. Even though the prospect of communication free from domination remains an attractive goal (Who now wants to remain dominated?), a world in which not all communication is transparent, in which agreement might be achieved by more mundane linguistic mechanisms such as courtesy and politeness (or even lying), or by such rhetorical tropes of speech as irony, satire, or hyperbole, is a possibility we ought not to foreclose. Why discount the positive effects of ambivalence or ambiguity in words (even if that were possible), why privilege the prosaic over the poetic, the logical over the rhetorical, the illocutionary over the perlocutionary?⁵ Certainly the latter terms in these pairs make political and theoretical life both richer and, ultimately, possible (even if at times confusing, perplexing, and frustrating). We surely ought to heed Foucault’s warning against hypostasizing a state of communication “without obstacles, without constraints, without coercive effects” (“Ethic of Care,” p. 18) lest we be seduced by the cult of the dialogue and blithely fail to recognize when, where and how power is at work. From this perspective, the seductions of a romanticized “ideal speech situation” are just as dangerous as the cynical strategies of a thoroughly hardheaded realism. Yet if all speech is not ultimately about reaching rationally grounded agreement, neither is it always the case that “to speak is to fight.”⁶

The opposition sketched here, between dialogue and domination, consensus and contest, reasoned discourse and rhetorical performance, seems intractable.

In a contest that replays the struggle between Socrates and Callicles in the *Gorgias*, Habermas and Foucault advance apparently irreconcilable arguments concerning the possibility of liberating truth from power. But is it possible, in the face of these oppositions, to cultivate a philosophical ethos that is both prosaic and poetic, theoretical and political, dialectical and rhetorical, a sensibility attuned to the desire for a philosophical foundation beyond political contest and for the need to disturb such foundations? Can we formulate a post-Socratic practice that combines a healthy dose of genealogical suspicion for all teleological forms of truth with the humanist goal of securing philosophical standards of the good available to everyone? Might we envision a “politics of truth” that sustains such standards yet that also exposes the political character of truth and resists its pretensions to uncontestability? Can we adopt and adapt an agonistic ethos to our search for philosophical or theoretical certainties, an ethos that would amount to a wholly ironic stance toward “truth,” its conditions and its possibilities? The *Gorgias* explores just such a post-Socratic agonistic ethos by advancing as a theoretical and political paradigm something very much like the unconstrained communication of an ideal speech situation even as it interrogates the very possibility of that ideal by dramatizing the rhetorical moves in the struggle (that occurs below or outside the dialogue’s argument) between Socrates and his interlocutors over who will control the terms of political discourse,⁷ both within and without the parameters of the dialogue.

That struggle is played out on a number of levels both dialectical and dramatic, logical and psychological, philosophical and political, discursive and rhetorical, between several characters and through a number of themes. To get at this layered complexity, I want to analyze the dialogue by paying attention not only to *what* the interlocutors say, but to *how* they say it. This means analyzing the dialectical progression of the argument as well as the parallel dramatic action, attending to a method that is logical as well as psychological, rhetorical as well as discursive, exposing the political in the philosophical. Indeed, as I will argue, the *Gorgias* subtly articulates how it is that Socratic philosophy presupposes a politics, or, more precisely, how the search for truth is at the same time a struggle for power, the inscription of philosophical discourse on the Athenian body politic itself a political act. The political continually encroaches upon the philosophical in the *Gorgias*, and in a way that heightens, rather than resolves, the contradiction between them. Philosophy and politics, dialectic and rhetoric, truth and power—these remain the essentially contested terms in the agonistic economy of Plato’s *Gorgias*.

I

The occasion for the dialogue is the visit of the rhetor Gorgias to Athens. Gorgias is receiving visitors at the home of his host Callicles, and Socrates wishes to find out from the expert exactly what his craft is and what value it

has. As the dialogue progresses, however, this initial theme broadens and multiplies: the conversation begins with Gorgias and rhetoric, then moves to Polus and the question of committing or suffering injustice, and finally takes up with Callicles the question of how one ought to live, as a philosopher or a politician. The dialogue concludes with Socrates' claiming for himself and philosophy the true arts of politics and rhetoric. Thematically, the dialogue returns to its starting point, the symmetry of the *Gorgias*' conclusion brings us back to its beginning through a Socratic redefinition of rhetoric: true rhetoric is practiced only by Socrates, he is the one citizen practicing the art of politics (*politike techne*), that art is identical with philosophy and it aims to make the Athenian citizens better. This expansion of the initial theme of rhetoric is also accompanied by an intensification of the discussion: as the dialogue enlarges its scope, the stakes involved in the discussion escalate accordingly. The question concerning rhetoric soon involves questions of responsibility, justice, civic education and political leadership. The *Gorgias* ends with an attempt (and, as we shall see, an ambiguous one) to transfer moral and political authority to philosophy and Socrates.

For all his incoherence, Gorgias is a gentleman and knows how to conduct himself decorously in public. He remains friendly to Socrates and encourages him to define rhetoric, even when that means defining it as flattery (463ab). Indeed, later in the dialogue when Callicles threatens to withdraw, Gorgias reenters the conversation as Socrates' ally and urges the recalcitrant politician to continue the discussion. Polus, the pupil of Gorgias, is a different story altogether, and only with him do we see how problematic is the teaching of his master. The product of Gorgianic education is boorish and ill-bred. What had been a rather friendly and intellectually abstract discussion among polite company quickly turns hostile and personal, potentially a game of domination. Polus of course is right to understand Socrates' attack on rhetoric as an attack on his chosen profession. For Socratic elenchos not only refutes an argument, it also refutes the way of life on which that argument rests. The stakes in the dialogue increase again when Callicles enters the discussion. Here is an opponent truly worthy of Socrates. Though he pretends goodwill, at issue in this intellectual drama is nothing less than the life of the philosopher, a situation Callicles does not hesitate to point out and about which he is correct. The focus of the struggle is multiple: a sophistic amorality versus justice, politics versus philosophy, and Athens versus Socrates (Friedlander, p. 261). How Plato has Socrates navigate this dangerous terrain in his pursuit of knowledge is instructive for the way in which we view a politics of truth.

The Gorgias is constructed as a series of dialectical engagements in which Socrates converses with three very different characters about, as we have seen, ostensibly different topics. Gorgias the professional orator is concerned with rhetoric; Polus, his rather clumsy pupil, praises then defends injustice over justice; while Callicles, the Athenian politician, champions the free and powerful life of the statesman over the slavishly weak philosopher. Despite this diver-

sity of topics and interlocutors, however, one issue runs like a thread throughout the dialogue and provides it with thematic unity: power and its relation to morality. When Socrates opens the dialogue by having Chaerephon ask Gorgias who he is, he wants to know about the power (*dunamis*) of rhetoric and how Gorgias uses it. When Polus indignantly leaps into the fray in defense of his master, he identifies the rhetor with the tyrant, but with one difference: where the tyrant achieves power through violence and force, the rhetor achieves it by artful persuasion. Callicles goes to the heart of the matter when, in his first speech, he unmaskes all talk of law, equality, and justice as inventions of the naturally weak and inferior designed to shackle the naturally strong and superior. There is only one law, insists Callicles, and that is the law of the powerful. All other talk is merely specious pretense. Against this array of arguments, Socrates must demonstrate that the power of true rhetoric serves justice, that the tyrant is powerless, and that the philosophical commitment to truth sets the moral standard for human action.

In his first response to Socrates' question about the power of the rhetorical craft, Gorgias links rhetoric to power and freedom, to the field of politics in the broad sense. Gorgias defines rhetoric as the craft that possesses the power to persuade by speech. Under Socratic cross-examination he narrows this broad definition down to the persuasion of the mob (*ochlos*) about the just and the unjust. The politician who wishes to succeed in those political debates taken up by the law courts, the council, or the assembly will find rhetoric indispensable. A neutral tool that will allow its user to pursue whatever ends he so chooses, rhetoric provides a power that will enslave others, be they physicians, trainers, or moneymakers. This first definition of rhetoric is significant for two reasons: first, is its amorality. Rhetoric will serve any ends its master wishes. It is a practice radically ungrounded and unguided by the values of the community it seeks to persuade, both self-interested and self-serving. Second, its power depends upon a distinction between the one who knows and the many who don't know, between the educated initiate (presumably the rhetor himself) and the ignorant, ill-, or misinformed demos. Where the former distinction leads to tyranny, the latter reveals a contempt for the demos. That contempt, however, must remain unspoken and be carefully concealed, given the rhetor's dependence upon those he must persuade.

Before Socrates begins his refutation of Gorgias, he has been at work making his own distinctions. In friendly preliminaries with the great orator, Socrates has already pointed out the difference between rhetorical display (*epideixis*) and dialogue (*dialeptomai*), a point Gorgias says he understands (447c1–4). He follows Socrates' request with the boast that he is equally adept at giving short answers as well as making long speeches, a boast that reveals his fundamental misunderstanding of Socrates' dialectical art. For Gorgias, short answers and long speeches are both part of rhetorical display. But Gorgias does not suspect that his eagerness to give the short answers Socrates requests involves him in a

subtle contest. He does not realize that, in submitting to questions by Socrates, he has had Socrates' "own law imposed upon him" (Friedlander, p. 247). Rhetoric, which Gorgias proclaims is the most comprehensive of the arts and the most powerful, is unattuned to the immediate struggle over its scope and status. Gorgianic rhetoric will prove no match for Socratic dialectic.

In the discussion that follows, Socrates makes a further distinction between conviction and knowledge, where rhetoric merely produces conviction without knowledge and does not teach about the just and the unjust. Gorgias admits that the rhetor does not teach (*didaskhein*) but merely persuades (*peithesthai*) the mob. As an example, Gorgias refers to the building policies of Themistocles and Pericles to demonstrate the power of rhetoric over the craftsmen responsible for the actual construction. Gorgias continues to extol the powers of rhetoric with another example: the rhetorician who knows nothing of the doctor's craft will more easily persuade the patient to submit to an unpleasant treatment than the doctor himself. Moreover, in a competition with a doctor or any other craftsman, the rhetor would persuade his audience to choose him rather than the expert, so powerful is his craft.

The power of this craft, however, does not entitle the pupil to abuse it. The student must use it justly. But if it turns out that he doesn't we should not blame the teacher, for he is not responsible, nor is the craft itself, but rather the man who doesn't use it rightly. And Gorgias himself will justly "hate and expel from the city and put to death" (457c) the student who uses rhetoric unjustly. Gorgias defends himself this way on three occasions, driving home the point that as a foreigner who potentially exerts great influence on the Athenian young, he must watch his step. He is in a vulnerable position and so must exercise caution by claiming moral neutrality for his teaching (Kahn, p. 81). Socrates of course will make it a point to contrast his true rhetoric with Gorgianic flattery. But there are two larger points that follow here: one concerns the teacher's responsibility for his pupils, the other concerns the possibility of moral neutrality. Socrates will later point out that the great Athenian statesmen did not make the citizens better, and that he, practicing the true art of rhetoric, is the only one now also undertaking the true art of politics. But this claim is complicated by the fact that Socrates will be convicted of corrupting the young, and insofar as he counts Alcibiades his protege (481d), is responsible for the corrupt behavior of his pupil. This "failure" of Socrates in the education of Alcibiades undermines his own claim about the benefits of philosophy and ironically links him to Gorgias.⁸

The dialogue here raises a question about the professed moral neutrality of Gorgias' craft. Does not all knowledge contain an "interest" that inheres in its very structure? If so, then the interest of medicine is the health of the patient, while the interest of rhetoric is the flattery of the demos and so the power of the rhetor. Whether the rhetor persuades his audience in the cause of justice or injustice is incidental to the fact of persuasion. What guides the oration is the

“victory” of the orator, whether for good or evil. Rhetoric that regards itself merely as a tool or technique is thus more seductive and dangerous than a rhetoric that honestly proclaims its will to power, for it conceals its interest behind a neutral facade and so lulls us into a false sense of its benignity. Socrates will argue that dialectic or philosophy has an “interest” too, but its interest lies in pursuing the truth, an interest shared by everyone, and hence not an “interest” in the conventional sense at all.

Under the pressure of Socratic cross-examination Gorgias changes his position a third time, finally assenting to Socrates’ view that if the teacher of rhetoric teaches just things, then he himself must be just. Once Gorgias has made this admission, he must agree with Socrates that the rhetor cannot use rhetoric unjustly. Thus Gorgias himself must teach justice and take responsibility for his pupils if he is not to be seen as a corruptor of youth and regarded with hostility and suspicion. Socrates shames the teacher of rhetoric into this admission because he is not willing to admit in public what would condemn him before his Athenian hosts. Socrates thus catches Gorgias in a contradiction between the amorality of rhetoric and his own conventional morality, a morality dictated by the paying fathers of his would-be pupils. The refutation thus shows us the dependence of rhetoric on public opinion: Gorgias cannot say what he really thinks without undermining the power of his craft, and Socrates demonstrates that rhetoric is powerless to negotiate this dilemma. The freedom and power of which Gorgias initially boasted (452d5) cannot be delivered by rhetoric after all: the rhetor is not free to speak his mind and is powerless before the public he must obey.

II

This rather reluctant admission by Gorgias is more than Polus can bear. If rhetoric doesn’t produce the power necessary for dominating debate in the assembly, defending oneself in court, or taking whatever one wants, then what does it produce? At this juncture, “the situation of the dialogue enters into the argument” (Voegelin, p. 25). Gorgias was shamed into silence not only because Socrates exposed the contradictions in his position but because of the embarrassing presence of the product of Gorgianic education; the vulgar and immoral Polus. Polus is quite ready to admit what Gorgias was not, that he studies rhetoric because he wants power in the city. For is not the rhetor, like the tyrant, able to kill, expropriate, or imprison anyone he wishes at any time? To prove that the tyrant is both powerful and happy, Polus praises a contemporary tyrant, Archelaus, who had recently risen to the rulership of Macedonia through a series of particularly vile crimes.

Polus the would-be tyrant cannot believe that Socrates doesn’t think Archelaus the most powerful and happy of men, ascribing to Socrates the same mo-

tivations, as if Socrates or any other Athenian doesn't envy the tyrant. What is revealed here is the measure of Polus' own tyrannical impulses as he gropes his rather inarticulate way towards the distinction which Calicles will make between nature and convention. Socrates is trapped by a conventional morality that does not give free reign to a man's true impulses, calling just what the mass of men believe. He is not strong enough to break out of the conventional mold, as does Polus, who appeals, however inchoately, to a law of nature under which the stronger and superior rule. Under such a "natural" dispensation, what Socrates conventionally calls injustice is naturally just. But as Calicles rightly points out, Socrates manipulates Polus into confusing nature and convention in his answers and so traps the pupil of Gorgias into an admission he does not believe, that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, and, further, that not paying justice is worst of all.

The exchange with Polus is instructive because of Polus' reliance on the many, the democratic practice of the vote, and his appeal to the tyrant Archelaus. Polus associates rhetoric, democracy, and tyranny, implying that the democratic rhetor is really a tyrant at heart willing to use the intimidation of numbers to get what he wants. Against this identification of power with tyranny and numbers, Socrates opposes his elenchos. Socratic elenchos appeals not to the many, but to only one, and in that appeal seeks to produce real conviction in the listener. Its power relies on the "unforced force of the better argument," not the thoughtless votes of the many. Nothing could be farther from the conventional conception of democratic power (as Gorgias and Polus represent it) than this model supplied by the practice of Socratic dialectic. And in this model rhetoric has no place, unless it is to persuade the tyrant or would-be tyrant to pay justice for the evils he has done. True rhetoric, then, is not in the service of a tyrant like Archelaus who would use it to gain power over others, but in the service of justice in order to gain control and moderation over oneself.

Socrates' conversations with Gorgias and Polus reveal a fundamental antagonism between Athenian political practice and Socratic dialectic, an antagonism that culminates in Calicles' prediction of Socrates' death and Socrates' assumption of the mantle of Athenian statesmanship. The rhetors and politicians merely flatter the demos, gratifying the citizens with pleasing words, as a cook gratifies the palate with pleasing food, in order to gain their favor and then their votes. Unlike the true politician or the doctor, the rhetor does not need to know anything, he only needs to seem to know, and just enough to be persuasive. Socratic dialectic, on the other hand, forces its participants to reflect on the nature and patterns of what they believe and do, not in order to persuade a mob, but to choose the good. Whereas rhetoric is given over to displays of verbal pyrotechnics as a means to conceal its ignorance, dialectic proceeds in a singularly mundane fashion that begins with familiar examples from everyday

life—shoemakers, pastry cooks, and doctors—to argue for the most important matters of justice. After the unhealthy display of the rhetors, Socrates will welcome the candid speech (*parrhesia*) of his next interlocutor, Callicles.

III

Callicles is a formidable and worthy opponent, the very antithesis to Socrates (Voegelin, p. 31; Jaeger, p. 138; Dodds, p. 267). He opposes rhetoric to dialectic, politics to philosophy, the naturally powerful to the conventionally just, and Athens to Socrates as his ultimate standards of judgment. Yet Callicles possesses all the qualities Socrates admires most: knowledge, goodwill, and free speaking. That is why Socrates refers to Callicles as his “touchstone” (487a). If Socrates succeeds in convincing the politician, then the substance of his argument must be true, since no one’s agreement could be counted worthier than that of Callicles (487e5). In a perverse sort of way, Callicles turns out to be the “ideal” interlocutor. If Callicles can truly be persuaded, then philosophy does have a point and place in the city and there are good reasons to believe that a philosophically grounded politics is possible. The outcome of that contest, however, is far from certain, and how one interprets that outcome will determine any assessment of where the *Gorgias* stands concerning the relationship between philosophy and politics, dialectic and rhetoric, truth and power.

Socrates begins that persuasion by laying the groundwork for the mutuality and friendship that meaningful dialogue requires. Callicles and Socrates both share the same experience (*pathos*) in the form of two loves: Socrates loves Alcibiades, son of Cleinias and philosophy; Callicles loves Demos, son of Pylampes and the *demos* of Athens (481d). Despite the professed Socratic identification of a shared erotic experience as grounds for dialogic community with Callicles, these examples tend to drive Socrates and Callicles apart rather than bind them together. Socrates juxtaposes the inconstancy of Alcibiades to the constancy of philosophy, which he, Socrates, follows, and then juxtaposes himself to Callicles, who flatters both the *demos* of Athens and the Demos of Pylampes. Implicit in these pairings is the opposition between politics and philosophy, rhetoric and dialectic, that will emerge again at the end of the dialogue when Socrates will characterize the great Athenian statesmen as flatterers of the Calliclean stripe. The comparisons, in addition to prefiguring the contours of the dialogue in so compact a space, underline the vast difference between the “partners” in conversation and point to the irreconcilability of the opponents. If Socrates cannot replace the love of the *demos* with the love of philosophy in Callicles, then it is unlikely that the experience they share will provide sufficiently fertile ground for communication. It is against this background, the *pathos* of communication, that the rest of the dialogue unfolds.

Callicles is a worthy opponent because he is unafraid to say aloud what Gorgias concealed and what Polus only inadequately articulated: the justice of domination. Unlike his guests, Callicles will not be shamed into admitting what he does not believe merely to satisfy conventional morality. Indeed, he has seen how Socrates trapped the two rhetors by appealing now to nature, now to convention, whenever it suited his purpose in the argument. Callicles will successfully avoid such Socratic sleight of hand if only he holds fast to the one objective standard there is: nature (482d–483a). In that way he can unmask Socrates' claims to truth for what they really are, the philosopher's will to power that hides behind the pretense of intellectual respectability.

In the great speech that follows, Callicles elaborates a genealogy of morals worthy of (perhaps inspiration for) Nietzsche himself.⁹ Socrates is advancing nothing but a slave morality, a set of conventions made by the weak and for the weak when he argues for justice. Such conventional lawmakers cannot defend themselves and so must define justice to their own advantage and for their own protection. They then call themselves virtuous and just for refraining from taking more than their share and shameful and unjust those who would take more than others (*pleonektein*) (483c). So do the weak and inferior manufacture virtue out of their weakness and tame the naturally stronger and superior into submitting to convention. But if we hold to nature (*physis*), we will see how things really stand. It is the same among men as it is among animals and cities: the strong rule where they can and the weak suffer what they must.¹⁰ The law of nature (*nomos physeos*) prescribes as much and it is only by rules contrary to nature that the weak and slavish hold the strong and noble in check. Thus is Socrates able to “turn the whole of human life upside down” (481c). Socrates would come to his senses and understand this, if only he would leave off philosophizing and turn to more important things. This is not to say that philosophy has no place in the education of a gentleman (*kalos k'agathos*), but when pushed to extremes, as in the case of Socrates, the result does not befit a free man. He will be unacquainted with politics, he will not be able to hold his own in debate, and, what is more, if he is dragged into court by an inferior man, he will be unable to defend himself. What good is a man who cannot protect himself from his enemies, a man whom one may hit with impunity? Better to leave off philosophy, Callicles admonishes, and tend to more important matters. Philosophy pursued in excess makes a man effeminate: he will be forever hanging about in corners with lisping boys, shy at public gatherings where great matters are at stake and reputations are won. The philosophical life is the life of a slave, hardly worthy of a free man and an Athenian.

Callicles champions the master morality of the “just by nature,” although his preliminary definition is none too exact. Socrates will force Callicles to revise that definition and eventually prove the position untenable. Callicles argues that the tyrant, the man who gives his desires free reign and possesses the capacity to satisfy them, is the model of nobility. Socrates opposes the tyrant with the

model of the philosophical man who strives not to gain more than his share, but to make his fellow citizens more just by teaching them successfully to rule themselves. Callicles first identifies the strong with the good: rule by the strongest is justice (488c). As with men, so too with cities. If it is just for a strong man to rule the weak, then a powerful city like Athens rules weaker cities with justice as well. Socrates directs his attack against this position by undermining the identification of the strong and the good. Do the numerous weak not prove better than the few stronger ones when the former impose their hated conventions on the latter? And then wouldn't equality and justice be according to nature (*physis*) and not convention (*nomos*)? According to the Socratic argument, justice is right by nature, contrary to the position of Callicles. Callicles is outraged by the prospect that a rabble of slaves, superior in strength alone, should rule their superiors. He immediately withdraws the argument and re-defines the good as the "better" (*beltion*).

After a short Socratic cross-examination, the "better" turn out to be those men who are wise and brave with respect to the affairs of the city. They ought to rule, and it is fair for them to have more than their subjects (491bd). Callicles is then brought up short by the Socratic query, "Ought the rulers to have more than themselves?" He quickly denies that such a man should be ruled at all. On the contrary, he should let his desires grow to their fullest and then possess the power to satisfy them: "luxury, intemperance and freedom" (*tryphe, akolasia, eleutheria*) are truly virtue and happiness, and their pursuit right according to nature (492c). Socrates then offers a series of examples meant to shame Callicles into admitting a distinction between good and bad pleasures: hunger satisfied by food, thirst by drink, an itch by a scratch. But what about the sexual tickle of the catamite? Callicles bristles at this last suggestion, and even goes so far as to upbraid Socrates for such a shameful example, but for the sake of argumentative consistency, maintains his position (494e–495a).

Socrates pushes the inquiry and Callicles further by attacking the equality of good and bad pleasures through the same appeal to "convention" that defeated Gorgias and Polus: Callicles implicitly admits the distinction of good and bad pleasures because he accepts a ranking of the virtues in which wisdom and courage are better than folly and cowardice. If, as Socrates concludes, the weak and base can experience more pleasure than the strong and brave, then by Callicles' account, the former are better than the latter. This is a conclusion Callicles cannot bear, and it forces him into the grudging admission that all along he has thought "some pleasures are better and others worse" (499c). Once Callicles has made this concession to conventional morality, Socrates will, step by step, prove his case for the superiority of the life of justice and temperance over the life of tyranny and license, for the superiority of the Socratic will to knowledge over the Calliclean will to power. As he does so, Callicles withdraws from the discussion. He first pretends ignorance (497b), then answers only to gratify his guest Gorgias (501c, 505c), and finally breaks it off

altogether when he suggests that Socrates either let the discussion go, have a dialogue with someone else, or ask and answer for himself (505e).

The discussion so far has juxtaposed two models of power, the Calliclean and the Socratic. For Callicles, political power is the power of domination, the ability of one man or one city to fulfill his or its unlimited desires. Political greatness means dominating debate in the assembly, gaining fame, honor, wealth and reputation, or, in the case of a city, being powerful enough to dominate other cities, “leaving behind monuments, whether for good or evil.”¹¹ For Socrates, being powerful does not mean dominating other men or cities, but dominating and controlling ones’ own desires and appetites, ordering the self and city (508a) in a just and lawful manner (504d). The best life is the life of the philosopher, because he has power over himself, is not dependent on the many as are the politicians, and will never commit injustice. Being great means being good, which entails forsaking honor, wealth, and reputation as those things are commonly conceived. Given this conception of “power,” Callicles “rightly sensed the revolution in the words of Socrates” (Voegelin, p. 28), for the Socratic criticism of Athenian politics has turned Callicles and his world completely upside down.

There is one more model of power in the dialogue, however, one given by the practice of dialectic itself. In that practice, power is dispersed among the participants in the conversation. The point of dialectic is not the domination of one interlocutor over another, but the mutual search for truth. Dialogue and dialectic serve no one person’s particular interest in getting or having more, but rather harmonize a plurality of interests in the common search for the good (*to agathon*) (500a). If there is competition, it is for mutual enlightenment, not personal gain or aggrandizement. Socrates reminds his partners in dialectic that he has no more knowledge than they, and that he searches in common with them for the truth (506a). The dialectical model of power resists tyranny and closure by insisting on the equality of the participants and honoring the diversity and multiplicity of viewpoints that characterize dialogue as the collective search for wisdom.

Yet the *Gorgias* culminates in Socrates’ famous claim that he alone of the Athenians practices the true art of politics (*politike techne*, 521d). Not the great statesmen of Athens’ past—Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, and, most importantly, Pericles—but Socrates, practices real rhetoric because through philosophy he makes the Athenians better citizens. Socrates advances a similar claim in the *Apology*, where he exhorts the jury, as he has exhorted his fellow citizens all his life, to care more for the goodness of their souls than for wealth, honor and fame—the stuff of conventional Athenian political life that Callicles so readily praises. But it is only in the *Gorgias* that Socrates claims philosophical dialogue as a paradigm for political deliberation (527d) and identifies philosophy as the practice of the true art of politics.

The contours of that paradigm delineated by Socrates in the *Gorgias* are

familiar from the early or aporetic dialogues and from his defense speech in the *Apology*. Socrates goes about the city testing and examining all whom he meets for their wisdom, ever the ironic man, always inquiring, searching, and professing ignorance. Philosophy, in contrast to rhetoric, entails the open-ended search for knowledge, wisdom, and justice, unpretentious in its claims and conscious of its mortal limits. Unlike his opponents, Socrates is more interested in following the *logos* of the argument, wherever it may go, than in winning a contest, as willing to be refuted as to refute (458a). Implicit in Socrates' transfer of political authority to himself and dialectical examination is the claim that if the Athenians were to follow this Socratic practice in their political deliberations, then the city would now be healthy rather than bloated with harbors, docks, and walls (519a), and the citizens "good" rather than the idlers, cowards, prattlers, and spongers they now are (515e5). As partners in a dialogue share a mutual commitment to the argument (*logos*), so too would deliberating citizens be united by a commitment to the good of the city. Debate in the Assembly would then resemble the dialectical search for the truth, a search that would result in the adoption of the best policy, that decision influenced neither by the most rhetorically persuasive speech (as opposed to the most logically persuasive) nor by any particular individual's or group's interest. Inside the dialogue as well as inside the Assembly, "the unforced force of the better argument" would ideally prevail. Moreover, the richness of the dialogical community defined by a plurality of voices and a multiplicity of perspectives would reflect a similar diversity in the Assembly, where plurality is the irreducible condition of successful moral communication and debate. Such is the practice and the promise of Socratic dialogue, both for us and for the citizens of Athens.

IV

But I am not sure that so easy an identification of philosophical dialogue with political deliberation is possible. For one thing, the very practice of Socratic philosophy begs the question of where, when, and how philosophy is political. Unlike the assembly, council, law court, or even tragedy, philosophy had no prescribed institutional status in Athens (though Socrates' suggestion in the *Apology* that he be maintained at public expense indicates that it ought to). That Socratic philosophy had no recognized public form or forum is bad enough, but the fact that Socrates deliberately avoided the official spaces and places of politics only makes matters worse. To claim a monopoly on the true art of politics and then refuse to participate in the "official" discourse of the city (or to do so incompetently)¹² indicates either the failure of philosophy as a political ideal or else the failure of the Athenian citizens to respond to Socratic philosophical education. In both cases, Socratic dialogue remains marginalized, per-

forming its work at the interstices between public and private, trespassing on both, at home in neither.

For these reasons, the *Gorgias* leaves us with an ambivalent message, both about the practice of Socratic philosophy itself and about its promise for the reform of the city's politics. This ambiguity makes it difficult for critical theory's ideal of unconstrained speech readily to absorb or assimilate the dialectic of the *Gorgias*. While I do not doubt that the *Gorgias* offers philosophical dialogue as something like an analogue for political deliberation, the dialogue also reveals that such a model is problematic, for its lasting impression is more complex, more nuanced, and certainly more ambivalent than this "ideal" reading suggests. A number of disturbing ambiguities mark the course of the dialogue, ambiguities that challenge the idealized image of an egalitarian speech community in search of the truth. These ambiguities tend to disrupt and so challenge as disingenuous the explicit arguments in favor of philosophy put forth by Socrates. They are generally dramatic in character, sometimes acknowledged by Socrates, but always reveal how the text subverts its manifest content in the rhetorical surplus of meaning it generates. Let me elaborate.

The atmosphere of the *Gorgias* contributes to this impression in a number of subtle ways. Unlike a dialogue such as the *Protagoras*, with its humorous and good-natured ambience, the fate-laden gloom of tragedy pervades the *Gorgias*, casting a somber shadow on the proceedings. Where the former dialogue portrayed the exaggerated vanity of the sophists as harmlessly comic and Socrates as a jester poking fun at such seriousness, here the menacing tone of Callicles points to Socrates' own trial and death and the "failure" of philosophy (Jaeger, p. 141). More than once Callicles reminds Socrates of the fate that awaits a man who devotes too much of his life to philosophy: he will be accused with impunity, unable to defend himself in court (486b4–6).¹³ Moreover, unlike the two other great antisophistic dialogues (*Protagoras*, *Euthydemus*), Plato presents the *Gorgias* in direct dramatic form, without the benefit of mediation by a narrator (Friedlander, p. 245). The characters confront one another, directly expressing themselves and their objective differences. The absence of narrative mediation and the dramatization of direct confrontation underscores the agonistic elements of the dialogue. Here direct drama subtly and effectively heightens the tension of the contest: the form of the dialogue rearticulates its content in the agonistic clash of opposites where once decorous speech threatens to drop all pretense to civility and is exposed as verbal combat.

The tone and texture of its language, the examples used, and the images evoked suggest another way in which the *Gorgias* deploys rhetorical strategies to achieve a certain philosophical effect. It is no coincidence that Callicles opens the dialogue with the words "of war and battle" (*polemou kai maches*), a hint that the impending philosophical conversation between Socrates and Gorgias will be "the continuation of politics by other means."¹⁴ Nor is it a coincidence that Plato sets the dramatic date in such a way that, although it is

impossible to fix with any certainty, there is no doubt that the war with Sparta provides both dramatic background to, and substantive content of, the dialogue.¹⁵ The war of each against all, portrayed by Thucydides' accounts of the stasis at Corcyrea and the "dialogue" at Melos, has now moved to Athens. The repeated assurances of mutual friendliness to the contrary, the form of the agon and the tone of war undermine the professed comity of intellectual exchange. As the dialogue progresses, the social veneer of urbanity wears thin. In the communicative struggle between Callicles and Socrates we must hear, not the achievement of consensus—as Habermas would have us believe—but rather, as Foucault will remind us, in a different, though related context, "the distant roar of battle."¹⁶

Finally, the *Gorgias* concludes with a myth full of religious imagery and symbols, the first intimation, Jaeger argues, that "behind the infinitely subtle dialectic distinctions in which his moral principles are concealed, there is a metaphysical transformation of the whole of life" (p. 141). Socrates quotes Euripides' "Who knows if life here be not really death, and death in turn be life?" Earlier in the dialogue Callicles was right to sense the revolution in Socrates' exchange with Polus, a revolution that would turn political life upside down. Now, at the conclusion of the dialogue, not only the conventions of the would-be politician, but the orientation of human life itself is reversed. Socrates leaves us wondering if he prefers death to life, and if he has abandoned Athenian politics altogether. Despite the cheery confidence of Socrates' convictions about the virtue of the philosophical life, the dialogue ends on a note of pessimistic resignation.¹⁷

The somber atmosphere, the reality of external and the imminent threat of internal war, as well as the reminder of Socrates' impending death, all provide a context for the "failure" of Socratic philosophy. That failure seems nearly complete: Socrates points out on several occasions that the purpose of debate is to persuade one's opponent, and he himself admits that if he succeeds in convincing Callicles, whom he deems his "touchstone," then he will have arrived at the truth of the matter. But by the end of the dialogue Callicles is not persuaded that the virtuous life of the philosopher is better than a life of *pleonexia*, even though Socrates has demonstrated the incoherence of that position. As in so many other dialogues in which Socrates outargues his interlocutor, Socrates here refutes Callicles, yet fails to change his way of life. In spite of Socrates' repeated efforts throughout the dialogue to establish a minimum level of comity and mutuality, the Socratic elenchos fails to encourage that agreement or conviction (*homologia*) in Callicles necessary to establish and maintain the speech community. Callicles, like Polus before him, slowly withdraws from any "honest" engagement with Socrates. As a consequence, Socrates fails to meet the standards of dialogical success he himself has set.

Closely related to this failure of philosophy is the failure of the dialogue form itself. Socrates repeatedly juxtaposes dialectic to rhetoric and insists on

conducting the conversation in the form of question and answer as a way of ensuring a kind of communicative equality: no one speaker will be permitted to dominate the discussion. But under the relentless questioning of Socrates, first Polus and then Callicles retreats from the dialogue. Callicles' answers become increasingly perfunctory, and he admits that the only reason he submits to Socrates' demagoguery is to please his guest Gorgias and maintain some semblance of decorum before the public. At the conclusion of the *Gorgias*, Callicles finally refuses to answer: dialogue becomes monologue and Socrates is left, not for the first time, talking to himself. The only voice we now hear is the voice of Socrates. The irony is that Socrates himself has brought about what he said he most feared: that Gorgias (or someone trained like him) would dominate the conversation, silencing other views and other voices. Despite Socrates' best efforts (or perhaps because of them) to save appearances, as the once actively engaged participants in the discussion withdraw from the community of the dialogue into private silence, the dialogic form of give and take succumbs to the centripetal forces of a Socratic oration.

To the extent that Socrates proclaims himself to be the only Athenian practicing the true art of politics and so claims philosophical dialogue as a paradigm for political deliberation, the failure inside the dialogue also indicates its failure outside. Despite Socrates' claims on behalf of philosophy, it is unlikely that it can successfully guide the politics of the city. If Socrates cannot convince Callicles in private conversation, how will he (or anyone else) be able to convince the Assembly in public deliberation? And doesn't the concluding Socratic monologue simply imitate the rhetorical display (*epideixis*) that Socrates deems inappropriate in both private philosophical conversation and public deliberation? How can philosophy guide political deliberation in any meaningful sense? Indeed, if Alcibiades represents another example of failed Socratic philosophical education, then perhaps it is best that philosophy stay out of the Assembly and away from politics. This purposeful mention of Alcibiades alerts us to what Socrates suppresses in his account of statesmanship. One might then ask the same question of Socrates that Socrates asks of Pericles: Has philosophy made any citizens better? If the presence of Polus gives the lie to the success of Gorgias' education in rhetoric, so too does the career of Alcibiades raise a doubt concerning the dialectical education practiced by Socrates. If Alcibiades is the product of Socratic education, then Socrates is indeed corrupting the Athenian youth.¹⁸ These ambiguities in the *Gorgias* suggest that perhaps Plato believes there is less to Socrates' boast about statesmanship than meets the eye. Such failures (with Callicles and Alcibiades) certainly indicate that Socratic dialogue is not possible "anywhere and at anytime" and that it provides no unproblematic paradigm or substitute for political deliberation.

Except perhaps for the *Republic*, the *Gorgias* is the dialogue most aware of its enabling context, most conscious of its own preconditions. It is a dialogue about dialogue, contains speeches about speech, and frequently pauses to re-

flect on the grounds of its own possibility. It is a dialogue that takes itself as its theme, a metadiologue. The subject of the *Gorgias* is the relationship between power and morality. But below or alongside the arguments about the value of rhetoric, the worth of justice or injustice, and the question of how one ought to live, the *Gorgias* portrays a struggle over who will set the terms of political discourse and so control both the dialogue and what counts as “moral” in it. In Foucault’s terms, it dramatizes how power implements the rules of right by which we live. If we pay attention to this subtext, we see a struggle over *what* the interlocutors will talk about and *how* they will talk about it. And, as I hope to make clear, Socrates sets the terms of discourse in such a way that he violates them in the act of establishing them. By articulating this paradox, the *Gorgias* indicates that no morality is free of power, no theory not implicated in political struggle, no logic without its rhetorical effects, no speech situation so ideal that it can escape the violence of its own founding. If philosophy is to replace rhetoric as the foundation of politics, as Socrates seems to teach, can it do so only by extraphilosophical means?

The answer to that question requires a further exploration of the dialogue’s highly reflexive deployment of rhetorical effects. Recent critics have noticed the importance of dramatic structure in the *Gorgias*, in particular how the complex nature of the elenchos “is reflected artistically in the interplay between the personal and the dialectical, between the dramatic and the logical structure of the refutation.” Every dialectical encounter with Socrates turns into a critical examination of the interlocutor’s own life (Kahn, pp. 75–76). In the *Gorgias*, Socrates relies as much on personal as on dialectical argument, as much on shame as on logic. As Socrates moves closer to the conclusion of a refutation, the personal becomes the dialectical. Socrates’ method then becomes less the attempt to argue Callicles into accepting his proposition than to maneuver him into acknowledging that he has really believed it all along. Socrates’ weapon in this psychological warfare is shame (see McKim). This exchange is significant for two reasons. On the one hand, it demonstrates the dependence of the rhetorician upon the *demos*. If the conventional morality of the city requires a conventional belief, then the rhetor or politician who, like Callicles, really holds unconventional (ie., natural) beliefs about justice cannot divulge them safely in public. On the other, it shows Socrates doing exactly what Callicles charged: appealing to either nature or convention when the occasion (and argument) suits him, and appealing to public opinion to intimidate an opponent. Read this way, can we understand Socrates’ claim—that in the pursuit of truth he is just as willing to be refuted as to refute—without irony? Or is truth fabricated piecemeal and out of alien forms by the hatred, passion, envy, and will to power of philosophers, who aren’t averse to deploying a variety of strategies, including that of shame, to maneuver their opponents into defeat?

Socrates reveals those strategies at the dialogue’s outset. He insists on conducting the conversation in the form of question and answer. Socrates is not

interested in witnessing a rhetorical display, but in engaging his interlocutor in a frank discussion. Gorgias agrees to his Socratic condition, boasting that he is capable of short answers as well as long speeches (449c). Polus is a different matter. He does not so readily submit to the Socratic condition when Socrates asks him to restrain his long speeches. But Polus is either a slow study or else he wilfully and subtly evades the condition: he either cannot or will not learn the elenchos. Socrates' ironic response is to provide a display himself, at the end of which he points out the violation of his own prohibition, one suspects both for Polus' edification and ours. Socrates (or Plato) is playing with Polus. At the same time Socrates drops the reader a clue: the dialogue, too, transgresses Socrates' prohibition against rhetoric.

Socrates continues to set the terms of the dialogue—how the discussion will be conducted—by threatening a walkout. If Polus refuses to restrain the prolixity of his speech, then what choice does Socrates have but to leave? Here again, Socrates sets the terms in which the discussion will be conducted, but those terms are themselves beyond contestation. And he does so by appealing to the crowd, who wish the conversation to continue. Polus would like to resist, but finds himself in a bind: if he refuses to grant Socrates' conditions, then he shows bad form; if he grants them, we all know he is no match for the master dialectician. We also feel that Socrates knows this and so engineers the dilemma in order to gain the upper hand. At this point in the dialogue, once Socrates has maneuvered his opponents onto dialectical territory, he can surprise and ambush them at will, carrying out a successful campaign of elenctic warfare. Successfully setting the terms of the discussion means that Socrates has already won half the battle.

The *Gorgias* dramatizes the struggle over *what* the interlocutors will discuss as well as *how* they will discuss it. If Socrates sets the formal parameters of the dialogue, he also sets the substantive agenda of the discussion. The Socratic maneuver is subtle, but Plato supplies enough clues so that we do not mistake its significance. Polus and Callicles both defend some version of the thesis that it is better to commit injustice than suffer it. To argue the other way round, as does Socrates, is a ploy to force a slave morality on the strong and noble natures of the masters. The argument Socrates pursues here, however, does not concern the superiority of the life of justice over the life of injustice, but rather whether everyone already believes as much. Socrates defends the following position: "I believe that you and I and all men consider doing injustice to be worse than suffering it" (474b). Polus, apparently unaware of the subtle, though crucial, shift in the epistemological stakes of the debate, responds accordingly with the counter: "I believe that neither you nor I nor anyone else believes that" (474b6). What is plain from this passage is that Socrates and Polus are arguing about what they already *believe* about justice and injustice, not what is in fact the case. We always prefer justice to injustice, Socrates argues, even if we do not always choose it, since we are often wrong about

what is truly in our best interest. By moving the discussion onto the terrain of “what you and I and all men already believe” Socrates does not have to prove anything about justice and injustice (McKim, pp. 34–48). He merely has to maneuver his opponent into a position where he will capitulate out of shame. By (re)establishing the terms of the argument, Socrates is free to wage the conversational equivalent of guerilla warfare: he catches his opponent in a contradiction between belief and action, between what a character says and how he lives his life, in order to change not only his beliefs about his life, but his life itself.

I have been arguing that the *Gorgias* is a complex, nuanced, and multi-layered dialogue that violates the expectations of those who would defend the idea of uncoerced speech (even if Habermas sometimes rejects Socratic dialogue as a naive example of ideal speech) and of the genealogical critic who would unmask all claims to truth (especially Platonic ones) as so many instances of the will to power, and so reject even the ironic truth, grounded in ignorance, of Socratic philosophy.

That Socrates offers philosophical dialogue as a paradigm for political deliberation is a serious, though I think ironic, gesture. The “failure” of either side to convince the other implies that there are certain inescapable constraints on the ideal speech situation and Socratic dialogue understood in its terms. To the extent that knowledge is virtue, rationally grounded agreement would have to result in conviction. But it is apparent from the dialogue that intellectual agreement does not necessarily produce existential conviction. Unlike critical theory’s faith in the “unforced force of the better argument,” the *Gorgias* acknowledges those concrete realities that condition the search for truth. The *Gorgias* shows us that pure Socratic dialogue is indeed “not possible anywhere or at anytime” by showing us the structural, material, and existential realities of power that disable the mutually beneficial search for truth.¹⁹ At the same time it shows us, negatively perhaps, those qualities—honesty (*parrhesia*), goodwill (*eunoia*), mutuality (*homologia*) and fearlessness—that enable a philosophical as well as a political dialogue.

In the “end,”²⁰ Socrates defeats Callicles but does not persuade him: the politician withdraws from the conversation. But the purpose of debate is to convince one’s opponent to change his life as well as his beliefs. Formal refutation is insufficient: knowledge must become virtue. To the extent that this manifestly does not occur with Callicles, Socrates fails to meet his own “self-set standards of success.”²¹ The dialogue is then a failure because it does not reach Callicles on its own terms. Socratic philosophy is a failure because if it cannot reach the “touchstone” Callicles, then it has little point or place in Athens. Socrates, and Socratic philosophy, then, are more appropriately characterized as an object lesson to be avoided rather than as a paradigm to be emulated or imitated.

Perhaps “failure” is too strong a word. After all, Callicles cannot put Socra-

tes down. More than once he rejoins the conversation after lapsing into silence. Echoing an observation made earlier by Polus (480e), Callicles admits that he is at once attracted to, and repelled by, Socrates. "I do not know how it is," Callicles admits in what is perhaps one of his more truthful utterances, "but your words attract me Socrates. Yet as with most people you do not quite convince me" (513c5). Though Socrates has not quite made his case, still Callicles cannot stop talking to him. There is no final closure here: Socrates is not persuasive, and Callicles has not quite severed the tenuous bond that holds them together. The politician and philosopher will continue talking to one another, for politics will not submit and philosophy has not yet had the last word. There is still work to be done, for the ground of philosophy (and of politics) remains essentially contested and contestable. Knowledge of that contestability, at least in the *Gorgias*, is what makes Socratic philosophy *political* philosophy.

But the *Gorgias* does not leave matters here. As we have seen, the dialogue periodically alerts its readers to the way in which what counts as true is determined by extraphilosophical means, by means outside, below, or prior to the "agreed upon" parameters of Socratic dialectic. This subtext of the *Gorgias* largely concerns who will control the terms of philosophical discourse, and that control is the substance of the *agon* between Socrates and his interlocutors. For once Socrates' partners submit to the condition of question and answer, to dialectic instead of rhetoric, the dialogue has shifted decisively in philosophy's favor. That Socrates aims to set the terms of discourse, and so control the dialogical as well as the political community, creates a paradox. Doesn't the dialogue instantiate a paradigm of uncoerced communication by means of subtly coercive rhetorical strategies while it simultaneously denies the operation of these tactics through its commitment to "the argument" (*logos*)? Hasn't Socrates transgressed the rules of philosophical discourse at the very moment and in the very act of establishing them? The *Gorgias* must then "conceal the gaps it opens by recourse to tactics it opposes."²² Callicles it seems, is right: Socrates hides his will to power behind the philosophical facade of truth.

All this implies that the *Gorgias* contains its own rhetorical dimension, that its dramatic structure (broadly understood) tellingly reveals those gaps the dialogue opens by pointing explicitly to the "tactics" used by Socrates but opposed by "Socratic" philosophy. The *Gorgias* both posits an ideal speech situation as a model for politics and reveals the intricate (and perhaps ineluctable) workings of power involved in the collaborative search for incontestable political foundations. The dialogue thus forces us to reflect not only on the difficulties (which are formidable enough) that attend communicatively achieved understanding, but also on what is suppressed, neglected, or ignored in the process of attaining such rationally motivated agreement. Socrates insists that truth is intersubjective and rests importantly on freely given conviction, and much of his efforts are given over (unsuccessfully) to establishing the basis for such meaningful communication. Yet the *Gorgias* asserts an even stronger claim about the impu-

rities of reason in its account of rhetoricity. The dialogue's irreducible rhetorical dimension—dramatized in the *agon* between Socrates and Callicles over who will control the terms of discourse—further alerts us to a lacuna in critical theory's account of uncoerced speech, a lacuna that makes the theory not especially attentive to the subtle workings of its own linguistic "power" to constitute what counts as "truth."

Though Habermas no longer posits an "ideal speech situation" anchored by transcendental moorings, his qualified claim that communicatively achieved agreement is immanent in the anthropologically deep-seated structure of everyday speech still implies an ideal or norm that excludes other forms of speech as valid because they fall below its threshold of rationality.²³ The very norm of rationality—in this case of the free, reasonable, and responsible agent to achieve a common situation definition based on valid criteria—constitutes a subtle mechanism of power that predefines what is reasonable and rational and so systematically excludes what is other, alien, or different in both individual and society.²⁴ Those feelings, motives, experiences, and selves that remain inarticulate or indistinct within the schema of rationally sanctioned discourse subsequently become the objects of disciplinary control, a control that tends to vitiate difference, contribute to uniformity, and hasten the conformity and thoughtlessness that any critical theory rightly suspects and fears. If genealogy does not readily acknowledge that "to speak is [not always] to fight," then critical theory is not always sufficiently attuned to the effects of power that produce its own possibility nor to the effects of power it produces. The *Gorgias* indicates how a critical theory that does not make itself the subject of its own genealogy of truth runs the risk, too, of concealing or denying those subtly coercive rhetorical strategies and tactics that attend even the best-intentioned attempts at unconstrained communication.

Does such a deconstructive reading of the dialogue, and of the ideal speech situation, abandon all potentially universal moral standards for the endlessly repeated play of domination? Does the *Gorgias* in the end really confer victory upon Callicles and rhetoric, Nietzsche and Foucault, while Socrates and philosophy, Habermas and reason, are unavoidably implicated in the workings of power? Can the dialogue be reduced merely to a struggle over who will control the language in which citizens speak as this interpretation suggests? Callicles himself provides one indication that reasoned agreement is possible and so partially validates Socrates' preference for the truth. That admission comes at the point in the exchange between Socrates and Callicles when the latter defends good pleasures against bad, the strong and noble against the weak and base (499c). Callicles has appealed to an *implicit* standard all along, a standard that Socrates exposes by suggesting a pleasure so ignoble that even Callicles squirms. This reliance on an implicit standard of judgment reveals a telling gap in Foucault's own account of genealogical critique that belies the possibility of the critic's own professed "happy positivism." Foucault steadfastly refuses

(perhaps this is his blind spot) to inquire into the motivations that guide his own critical activity. If he did, wouldn't he have to admit, with Callicles, that some regimes of power are not just different, but better than others?²⁵ And isn't an unreflective genealogy that fails to investigate its presuppositions in danger of becoming the new norm, standard, or center which would then require its own genealogical critique? The *Gorgias* dramatizes—and the historical triumph of Socratic-Platonic philosophy over sophistic rhetoric confirms—the susceptibility of critical and even revolutionary movements to travel from the margins toward the center, from the outside to the inside, so that the radicalism of today becomes the party of order tomorrow. The *Gorgias* thus contains a profound irony, all but lost on the canonists, rationalists, and other self-proclaimed enemies of deconstructive play: in an effort to disturb its own (and all?) drive toward closure, the dialogue portrays a Socrates more attuned to the subtle workings of rhetoric and power than his formidable adversary Callicles, a philosophy that acknowledges its own implicit reliance on politics even as it tries to transcend that reliance, and a philosopher who resists canonization by the hagiographers of truth, even as Plato places him at the head of the Athenian political hierarchy.

The *Gorgias* pushes at the limits of both the ideal speech situation and the obstacles that inhibit its attainment, at the search for truth and the realities of power, at the practices of dialectic and rhetoric, philosophy and politics. This perspective on the *Gorgias* alerts us to the insufficiencies in the account of truth's relation to power given us by Habermas and Foucault. If critical theory ultimately succumbs to a blind spot in its attempt to disentangle power from knowledge (as I think the *Gorgias* reveals), then genealogical criticism suffers from a similar debility in its refusal to acknowledge that its own deconstructive energy feeds upon the existence of ideals that make intelligible the real, upon norms to define what is deviant, upon a center against which to mobilize the margins. If critical theory too readily posits its own version of reason as an incontestable final marker, genealogical critique too readily dismisses those traditional signposts (truth and reason included) that help us negotiate the difficult terrain of a (post)modern geography virtually without landmarks. Finally, if critical theory ultimately fails to make itself the subject of its own critical inquiry, then genealogical play, while it certainly deconstructs final markers, similarly fails to excavate its own origins and thereby tends to reinstate itself as another marker of finality. The *Gorgias* neither calls for the "dissolution of final markers"²⁶ *tout court*, nor posits a teleological truth that will secure the horizons of our identities, practices, and institutions once and for all. Rather, the dialogue maintains in productive tension two contradictory, but no less necessary impulses: it both projects philosophical dialogue as a foundation for politics and contests that projection through the agonistic struggle between Callicles and Socrates—a struggle that leads not to annihilation but to the continuous activity of contests. The *Gorgias* thus cultivates an agonistic ethos that is

both philosophical *and* political, dialectical *and* rhetorical, aware of the acute desire for philosophical foundations beyond political contest *and* of the need to disturb such foundations. The dialogue's great achievement is to keep these contradictions—which are our contradictions as well—alive and so prohibit us from privileging either side of the contest and slipping into a forgetfulness about the political character of truth, a politics dramatized by the *Gorgias* itself.

A glance back over the *Gorgias* shows that dialogue to have been concerned with foundations, with the need for a solid philosophical ground for Athenian politics. On close inspection, however, that philosophical foundation appeared less than stable, built on shifting rather than permanent soil, a fractured mass traversed by fissures and cracks, shot through with paradox and contradiction. As we have seen, the dialogue hints at various solutions to finding (or founding) a stable basis for politics beyond question, opposition, or rhetorical manipulation, yet it returns us again and again to that essentially contested terrain. The dialogue searches now hopefully, now resignedly, for a ground beyond politics—beyond power—in the dialectical philosophy of Socrates, only to reveal philosophy's founding moment as—political. The *Gorgias* cannot, or does not, wholly disentangle truth from power, but rather implicates each in the construction of the other. One way to characterize this inability, or refusal, to separate philosophy from politics, truth from power, and anchor the latter in the former, is as a “failure.” But we have also seen that failure is perhaps too strong a word, not only because the contest ends inconclusively and so keeps the *agon* alive, but also because, as one might imagine, the *Gorgias* represents nothing like Plato's final word on the subject. The intractable problems of politics and the genuine yearning to place those problems and their solutions beyond contestability persist in Plato's theoretical imagination well beyond the writing of the *Gorgias*.

NOTES

1. I have relied primarily on E. R. Dodds's edition of Plato's *Gorgias, A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), as well as Terence Irwin's more recent translation with notes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). Translations are Irwin's, unless otherwise noted.

2. Dodds (p. 1 of his Introduction) cites Pohlenz, pp. 142, 151; Wilamowitz, vol. 1, p. 234; Taylor, p. 106, “Life and the way it should be lived, not the value of rhetoric, is the real theme,” and Festugiere, p. 382, “The true subject is the knowledge of what is the life that a man worthy of the name ought to lead” for evidence that the dialogue is not about rhetoric. Exceptions to these interpretations are Eric Voegelin's “The *Gorgias*,” in *Plato and Aristotle*, vol. 2, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957); Paul Friedlander, *Plato*, vol. 2 (New York: Bollingen, 1964); and Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943). Among the most recent critics, Charles Kahn, “Dialogue and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. Julia Annas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), and Richard McKim, “Shame and Truth in Plato's *Gorgias*,” in *Platonic Writings, Platonic Read-*

ings, ed. Charles Griswold (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), are attentive to the inseparable connection between the craft of rhetoric and the morals of the craftsman.

3. See for example Michel Foucault's "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*; Jacques Derrida's essay on "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. with an introduction by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), and Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Gozdich, with an Afterword by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 26–28, 74–75, 78.

4. Jurgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Intermediate Reflections*, trans. and with an Introduction by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 287. "The Ethic of Care for the Self," in *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), p. 18.

5. Such a discounting characterizes Habermas's criticism of the rhetorical in Derrida. See the essay "On Leveling the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Rhetoric," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 185–210.

6. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 10.

7. William Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, 2d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

8. There is evidence extraneous to the *Gorgias* concerning both Alcibiades' relationship to Socrates (see the *Symposium*, 212d–223d) and his less than paradigmatic behavior. See Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 6.28.2; 6.61.1–7 concerning the affair of the Hermai; 6.89.1–6; 6.92.3.2–4 where Alcibiades goes over to the Spartans; 8.44.1–8.56.5 for his intrigues with the Spartans; and 8.86.4–7 where he goes back over to the Athenian side.

9. On Nietzsche's relation to the dialogue, see Dodds's Appendix, "Socrates, Callicles, and Nietzsche," pp. 387–91, where he gathers a wealth of references in Nietzsche's corpus relating to Callicles, Socrates, Plato, and the sophists.

10. Dodds (p. 268) has not failed to notice the parallel with the argument made by Athenian generals at Melos according to which cities obey the rule of the stronger (*upo phuseos anangkaias*), and which is later referred to as a law (*nomos*) in Thucydides, 5.105.2. Compare Callicles' *kata nomon ge ton tes phuseos* (483e3).

11. This is of course Pericles, in the Funeral Oration. Thucydides, 2.41.4–5.

12. See Socrates' allusion to his inexperience regarding legal procedure at *Gorgias* 522b3–c2, and his opening speech in the *Apology* where he confesses his unfamiliarity with the procedures of the law court.

13. Both Voegelin, p. 34, and Friedlander, p. 261, see this touch as distinctly authorial and suggest Plato's own doubts about the success of the Socratic enterprise.

14. E. R. Dodds, p. 384, quotes V. De Magalhaes-Vilhena, *Socrate et la legende platonicienne*, p. 128. The phrase is of course from Clausewitz.

15. References in the dialogue cover a span from 429 B.C., the year of Pericles' death, to 405 B.C., the year after the trial of the generals responsible at Arginusae. See Dodds, pp. 17–18, and Arlene Saxtonhouse, "War: An Unspoken Theme in Plato's *Gorgias*," *Interpretation*, 11, no. 2 (1983): 142–44.

16. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 308.

17. Cf. The *Apology*, which concludes on a similar note: Socrates remains calm in the face of death and professes ignorance about life after death, as he does here, but is pessimistic about the political efficacy of philosophy in a city like Athens.

18. This is further complicated by the fact that Alcibiades was Pericles' ward. Alcibiades, then, is something that Socrates and Pericles both share. Socrates' condemnation of Pericles thus begins to reflect on himself and brings Socrates closer to Gorgias in the dialogue, insofar as Gorgias admires Pericles and the tradition of Athenian statesmanship.

19. On this point, Habermas and the *Gorgias* agree: A critical theory exposes the power and asymmetry that obscure or otherwise distort speech situations so as to clear the way for the "unforced force of the better argument." According to this reading, Socrates too has an interest, but it is in the "truth." I will argue that the *Gorgias* and critical theory part ways precisely at the point

where the dialogue concedes the irreducible presence of rhetoric in even the most honest of philosophical dialogues, while Habermas aims to purge all speech of its rhetorical contaminations. For the technical discussion of illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, which correspond to the difference between propositional statement and rhetorical effect, and of how this distinction is possible, see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Intermediate Reflections*.

20. I put it this way because, as will become clear, I'm not sure the *Gorgias* really ends. Of course the dialogue stops in a conventional sense, but its lasting impression is one of further provocation, not final closure.

21. James Wisner, "The Force of Reason: On Reading Plato's *Gorgias*," in *The Ethical Dimension of Political Life*, ed. Francis Canavan (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1983), p. 56.

22. William Connolly, "Democracy and Territoriality," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 20., no. 3 (winter 1991) p. 468.

23. Habermas finds "anthropologically deep seated general structures" in all speech. See his chapter "Geschichte und Evolution," in *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 241. These structures predate humanity as such: "Labor and language are older than man and society." See Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), p. 137.

24. For an account of this norm as it functions in a discourse ethics, see the essays in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. C. Lenhardt and S. Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), especially the title essay and "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification." In these essays Habermas sets out his principle of universalizability: A norm is universal if "the consequences and side effects that its general observance can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the particular interests of each person affected must be such that all affected can accept them freely" (pp. 65, 120). My account of the *Gorgias* means to show that this principle of argumentation, which rests on the "free acceptance" of validity claims, presupposes—indeed conceals—a standard of, and procedure for, rational discourse that is itself *contestable*. This paragraph borrows from the discussion of Habermas in my essay "Between Modernity and Postmodernity," *Political Theory*, vol. 22, No. 1 (1994): 87.

25. Nancy Fraser, among others, has asked this question about implicit normative standards. See her "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions," *Praxis International* 1 (1981): 283. While I agree in general with her point, she, like Habermas, tells only half the story by polarizing the contradictions in the relationship between power and normativity, rather than, like the *Gorgias*, thinking them in tension. See also Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, chap. 10, "Some Questions Concerning the Theory of Power: Foucault Again."

26. Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Marcy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).