

**Plato. *Gorgias*. Translated by W. R. M. Lamb. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001.**

Plato (428-348 B.C.) studied under Socrates, and instructed Aristotle. His philosophical system based on ideal forms supported a potent ethical structure. Plato's system proved seminal to all subsequent Western philosophy. Plato founded the Academy in Athens, where he taught until his death.

**I. Introduction of the Speakers.**

Socrates arrives late for Gorgias's feast, at which Gorgias is performing. Socrates wishes to learn the nature of Gorgias's art and what Gorgias teaches, and puts up his companion Chaerephon to inquire of Gorgias. Gorgias professes to answer any question put to him, and has heard no new questions for years. Friend Polus extols Gorgias's art as the finest. Socrates criticizes Polus for failing to answer the question: what is Gorgias's art? Gorgias leaps in, claiming to be a rhetorician. Gorgias consents to be brief in his answers.

**II. The Nature of Rhetoric.**

Gorgias: The art of rhetoric is speech itself. Socrates inquires skeptically about the subject matter of rhetoric. Gorgias: Rhetoric teaches a person to persuade an audience to his point of view. Socrates: What is persuasion, and with what matters does it deal? Gorgias: Law courts and public debate concerning justice and injustice. Socrates: But you leave technical matters to experts. So, rhetoric concerns inculcating beliefs. Gorgias: Yes, but rhetoric comprises within itself almost all the other powers as well. Gorgias argues that the improprieties of some taught by rhetoricians should not depreciate the rhetoricians themselves. Both agree that disputes should be conducted to find the truth of a matter, and for no lesser purpose. Socrates: It is better to be corrected than to correct. One gains knowledge.

The audience approves continuing Socrates's and Gorgias's conversation. Gorgias agrees with Socrates that the rhetorician knows less or nothing of his subjects as compared to persons who have mastered those subjects, but nevertheless persuades crowds of ignorant persons, despite the rhetorician's own ignorance.

**III. The Unjust Usurper.**

Gorgias: The rhetorician teaches his students the nature of justice, if they are ignorant of it. Socrates: And knowing justice, the rhetorician wishes always to be just. But earlier Gorgias said a rhetorician might employ rhetoric to persuade of an unjust result. Polus intervenes, which Socrates welcomes, provided Polus agrees to be brief. Polus inquires of Socrates as to the nature of rhetoric. Socrates: Rhetoric is a shrewd knack for flattery, akin to cooking, adornment, and sophistry. Rhetoric is an unsavory branch of bad politics. Gorgias jumps back into the debate. Socrates explains that rhetoric is flattery because rhetoric aims at what is pleasant, rather than what is best. Rhetoric is fake justice. Rhetoricians have no real power, even though they appear to rule cities. They do as they deem fit, but do so ignorantly. Power should bring good results to those exercising it. A ruler ruling badly, though according to his own lights, is to be pitied. He does wrong, which is the greatest evil. Only justly exercised power is a good. The just are happy; the wicked wretched.

Polus objects that in Macedonia, a deceitful slave rose to rule by murder; yet, he rules happily, so long as he avoids retribution. Socrates demurs: no unjust ruler is happy, and one that goes unpunished is unhappiest. Polus laughs. Socrates criticizes Polus's use of rhetoric to defeat arguments without refuting them: appeal to crowds, creepy speaking, and laughter. Socrates convinces Polus that doing wrong is worse than suffering wrong, and then that the unpunished wrongdoer suffers the greatest wrong.

Callicles asks Socrates if he is joking, because Socrates's argument means to turn all of human life upside down. Socrates answers that Callicles is offended by philosophy. He must either refute her or live in self-discord. Callicles fumes that Socrates a "true demagogue" purveying confusions between nature and conventions, which are uneducated obfuscations. Convention, which is the crowd speaking, argues that seizing advantage over many is wrong. But nature shouts that the best men should have power over the worse, and the able over the feeble.

Extraordinary men trample law codes and seize power; this is natural justice. So, leave philosophy; seek better things. Philosophy befits young men, but makes old men ridiculous and ignorant of human character in daily life. Socrates answers, with great sarcasm, how lucky he feels to have found Callicles to dispute, for Callicles is not bashful, but speaks his well-educated and friendly mind. Callicles calls Socrates a word-catcher purveying drivel. Callicles argues: He lives best who encourages his desires; powerful motivations should be satisfied without limitations. Virtue consists in doing and getting what one wants from others by force. Socrates tells the allegory of the sieve and leaky jar, which fails to impress Callicles. Callicles argues that there is no pleasure that is not good. Socrates refutes this position.

Callicles changes position, arguing that some pleasures are good and others bad. Socrates chides Callicles for toying with him. They discuss the structure of good living. The topic deserves sober deliberation.

#### **IV. Pursuit of Goodness.**

Socrates summarizes his previous conversation with Gorgias and Polus. Socrates concludes that men should pursue desires which make them better men, and resist desires which make them worse. Callicles claims to have been complying with Gorgias's wishes in the dialogue with Socrates. Gorgias again urges Socrates to complete the argument. Socrates reiterates his previous points, and asks if length of life alone is an end. Socrates tells the parable of the sea captain, concluding that one's manner of life matters more than mere longevity. The good statesman assists citizens to be better men. This Callicles has not accomplished in his young life. Callicles and Socrates spar over the worth of Pericles, ruler of Athens' golden age. Socrates disparages Pericles for corrupting Athenians.

Socrates ruminates upon Callicles's implied threat that a person who thinks like Socrates might be punished by Athens. Socrates agrees that an Athenian villain might put to death a man who had done no wrong. In Socrates's view, only he practices true statesmanship. He makes Athens better. His only defense is that he speaks no unjust word. Socrates avoids evils, so he does not arrive in Hades gorged on misdeeds, which is the greatest evil.

Socrates recounts the Fable of Judgment, by which Zeus's mortal sons, now dead, judge the dead worthy of the Isle of the Blest or Tartarus. Socrates draws the lesson of a strict dualism, body and soul, in which the deceased soul bears the marks of its life in the body and experiences. Socrates concludes that most (but not all) rulers are wicked. One's goal must be to seek to be greatly good in life and death.