

Gorgias 499b–509c

1. Afterthoughts on the Pleasure Passages (up to 499b)

- (1) ‘Thank you for this generous and frank elaboration of your position’, says Socrates to Callicles at 492d. That position is that the right life is one where our desires and appetites have free reign; where sensual; self-indulgent freedom is a life of virtue (aretē) and happiness (eudaimonia) (491e–492c).
- (2) *Note.* ‘Aretē’ derives from ‘aristos’, which is the superlative of ‘agathos’, which means good. Hence, ‘aretē’ essentially means ‘best’, which justifies translating it as ‘excellence’ or ‘perfection’. In the *Meno*, one of the first definitions of virtue is as a sort of manliness (71e)—the Latin for ‘aretē is ‘virtu’, which roots in ‘man’ (vir). Callicles agrees with this connotation.
- (3) The arguments involving jars, itch-scratchers, catamites, the simultaneous experience of pleasure of pain but not good and bad, and the coward and the fool do not, and should not, compel Callicles *logically* or dialectically: they are not very good arguments. But this is the point: Callicles is not persuaded by argument, but like Polus, by shame—but not in the same way as Gorgias and Polus (see handout 7).
- (4) Towards 499b, Callicles has *withdrawn* his hedonistic position, explicitly conceding at 500d (see also 506c). How come? Socrates continuously *stokes Callicles’ pride*: flatters him for his frankness (parrēsia: a freedom from conventions and customs of the ‘weaklings’), courage (andreia—‘manliness’) (494d), and resistance to (unmanly) shame (487d, 494c).
- (5) The catamite and the coward examples make Callicles realise he is prone to shame after all: he finds the examples repugnant—they violate his sense of pride, and he realises that these are shameful pleasures. To take pleasure in what is so obviously shameful is inconsistent with his understanding of ‘manliness’, and thus virtue: if pleasure *P* is shameful (aischron), then a proper man (like me) cannot possibly want *P* (without ceasing to be a proper man [as I am]).
- (5) Callicles realises that not all pleasures are good—he saves face in front of the audience by saying he answered *in jest* (paizōn), and that nobody seriously denies there are good and bad pleasures (499b, cf. 495a).
- (6) This seems the positive power of shame: when reason fails, appealing to spirit (thumos) can reveal the value of virtue or morality against the licentious allure of desire and appetite—pleasure in general.
- (7) And *that* is the critical point about rhetoric: pleasure leads people astray, and rhetoric is a kind of flattery (kolakeia), a knack at producing pleasure (hēdonē) and gratification (charitos) (462c). Rhetors hence *induce* the very thing that is opposed to virtue, morality, and the good. The spectre of shame makes Callicles see this.¹

1 For details, see Moss, J. (2005). Shame, Pleasure, and the Divided Soul. In D. Sedley (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 24, 137–69.

2. Things Come Together: from Pleasure back to Rhetoric—and Beyond

- (1) pleasure $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{better (nobler), beneficial, either unpleasant or painful} \\ \text{(lupas) or pleasant (hēdonas)—what we should seek (503c)} \\ \text{worse (inferior), harmful: bad effects, either unpleasant or} \\ \text{pleasant (?)—what we should avoid} \end{array} \right.$
- (2) *Recall*: all we do is for the sake of good; good is the end (telos) of all our actions (467–8).
- (3) *Aside*. Plato paints a more favourable picture of pleasure in *Protagoras*, where the good is defined as long-term pleasantness, or what contributes to a life in which pleasure is more prevalent than pain.² (This sounds rather Epicurean.)
- (4) It takes expertise (technē) to distinguish good from bad pleasures (500a).
- (5) *Recall*: there is a difference between knack (empeiria) and expertise (462–5). Knacks are concerned with arousing pleasure; expertise is concerned with the good (500b, 500e–501a).
- (6) Popular rhetoric is a flattering knack—shameful because it only *pleases* the audience (crowd [501d], recall Gorgias’ definition at 459a). It does not aim at the good; avoid it.
- (7) *Recall* logos (501a): experts (craftsmen) generate structure, organisation or arrangement (taxis), and order (kosmos). Order is good (504a). This goodness is caused by law and convention (nomos): law is the reason for *x*’ orderliness (504d).
- (8) There is inner and outer order (see 13 below). Psychic order is justice (dikaiosunē) and self-control (sōphrosunē).
- (9) The disordered (unbalanced, ‘unhinged’) life is not worth living (504e). Callicles’ ideal life of incessant self-indulgence is such a life (cf. 500c), e.g., he has a disproportionate share (508a, see 490a: pleonexia).
- (10) To indulge pleasures in a disordered mind is like giving in to a sick person’s desires (505a).
- (11) *Recall*: discipline (= punishment, kolazein/kolazesthai [verb]) is needed to order minds, and thus to move them towards the good (perfecting one’s soul, see *Ap.* 29e).
- (12) *Interlude*. Gorgias intervenes to keep the discussion alive. Callicles feigns disinterest—to avoid shame? Socrates provides a summary.
- (13) A sōphrōn (sound-minded, disciplined) person necessarily acts befittingly towards *others* (and the gods): just to other people, pious to the gods. Such a person is morally complete/perfect (teleōs): just, courageous, pious (507c).
- (14) Since discipline and justice guarantees flourishing (eudaimonia), all our actions ought to promote them: in ourselves and in society (polis) (507d–e).
- (15) Callicles’ intemperate hedonist is friendless and without love (507e–508a).
- (16) *Outlook*. Proper rhetoric makes citizens better persons.

2 For details, see Gosling, J. C. B. and Taylor, C. C. W. (1982). *The Greeks on Pleasure*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

