A Purpose of Platonic Polyphony

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Philosophers tell us the way it is. Or at least they try. The good ones tell us the way it actually is; the bad ones inadvertently tell us the way it isn't. In either case, they speak most naturally with one voice. Not Plato: he speaks with many voices. Why? This has understandably puzzled his readers. For there are many early dialogues which end in *aporeia*, with Socrates stumped. Think of the *Euthyphro.* If Plato speaks through Socrates in this and other such dialogues, is he not then telling us the way it isn't? And doesn't this result therefore rank him among the bad? Moreover, there are some later dialogues in which Socrates is clearly the inferior opponent. Think of the *Parmenides*. Is Plato here speaking through someone else? If so, does his rejection of the Socratic voice imply a criticism of his master, or possibly of himself? Finally, there are a few middle dialogues which present characters whom Socrates ostensibly cows into submission but cannot, upon close examination, defeat. In this paper, I offer an interpretation of the most dramatic of these episodes – the *Gorgias*, with its brilliant antagonist, Callicles – in an effort to understand why Plato bothers to present us in one dialogue with two competing, equal, and ultimately incommensurable voices.

On the surface of the dialogue, Socrates and Callicles disagree about morals – the values of justice and punishment; as I hope to show, however, these disagreements stem from deeper differences of metaphysics, meaning, epistemology, and style. Socrates and Callicles do not merely disagree: they clash. Each presents a network of claims, intimately connected with one another, internally consistent, but impossible of refutation

by the other. This is what I mean by incommensurability: quite literally, these competing positions cannot be measured against one another, let alone against a common measure, since the distance between them, the gaps, are too great. It is my aim in this paper, therefore, to exhibit each network of claims in turn – beginning with Socrates, proceeding to Callicles – and then to reveal the gaps between them. By doing so, I seek to explain at least *a* purpose of Platonic polyphony.

I: Socrates

Let us begin, then, with Socrates. He famously asserts that it is better to suffer wrong than to do it, and that if one has done wrong it is better to be punished for it than to go unpunished (469c2-3, 475e4-6; 476a5-7). There isn't time now to examine his arguments for these claims, although I believe they are valid on their own terms; what concerns us here is the relationship of these moral claims to two, roughly metaphysical claims.

Socrates asserts the first of them while recommending the traditional virtues, saying that "the virtue of each thing, a tool, a body, and further, a soul and a whole animal, doesn't come to be present in the best way just at random, but by some structure and correctness of craft, the one assigned to each of them." (506d5-8). According to this view of virtue – very broadly understood as the excellence of anything – it is achieved by craft. A good portion of the *Gorgias* is thus not surprisingly concerned with the structure of crafts, and especially their opposition with knacks.

A knack, argues Socrates, pursues pleasure, whereas a craft pursues the good. As an example of the distinction, he compares pastry baking with medicine. Each pays

attention to the body, but the first aims to please it immediately, while the second aims to improve it over time. There is also a difference of method. A knack is just that: an informal ability to achieve a result. "Through routine," he says, "it merely preserves the memory of what customarily happens, and that's how it supplies its pleasures." (501b) Contrarily, a craft is a formal technique. Ideally, it "has investigated both the nature of the object it serves and the cause of the things it does and is able to give an account of each of these." (501a) The same two distinctions – aim and method – apply to considerations of the soul. According to Socrates, there is knack about it called rhetoric, which aims to please the soul and learns to do so through trial and error. There is also, then, an opposing craft, justice, which aims to improve the soul and learns to do so through disciplined reflection upon its nature and causes.

The goal of this craft of justice is self-mastery (491d), the inculcation of order and harmony in the soul (504). Not until he writes the *Republic* and the *Phaedo* will Plato have an elaborate theory of the soul's nature and causes. For the *Republic* will develop a tripartite theory according to which the harmony and order inculcated by the craft of justice are harmony and order of parts of the soul, and the self-mastery of the just man is the rightful rule of his rational part over subordinate passion and desire. The *Phaedo,* moreover, will argue that the causes sought by this craft will be final rather than material – to anticipate a distinction elaborated much later by Aristotle (97c-99d). In this way, the person who has been trained in this craft – the virtuous, and specifically the just, man – will exhibit human nature more than the raw, uninitiated, or untutored man. The *Republic* will make amply clear that this moral training is available in a well-regulated city, especially the utopic city imagined by Socrates. But even here in the *Gorgias*, he argues

that politicians like Themistocles and Pericles have failed in their duty to train Athenian citizens in justice. Implied by such an argument is the claim that a real city, and its leaders, should offer such training.

Once he has at least envisioned a craft of justice, Socrates loses no time in privileging it over the knack of rhetoric. Inferior as this knack may be in truth, however, it will nonetheless defeat the craft of justice in competitions for popular favor, since the public so often prefers pleasure to good. Socrates compares this situation with that of the pastry chef and the physician competing for the favor of children. Of course the children will prefer the sweet pastries of the chef to the bitter medicines of the physician. On one hand, they lack the foresight to appreciate the eventual rewards of immediately painful medicines. On the other, they can clearly see the immediate pleasures of the pastries, despite their painful consequences. In their ignorance, any adult choosing to follow the physician rather than the chef, to consume medicines rather than pastries, would appear foolish.

So likewise are those untutored in the craft of justice – they are like children to whom the appeals of rhetoric and the immediate pleasures of fame and power it promises are seductive. They lack the foresight to appreciate either the painful consequences of this seduction or the pleasant reward of justice – since, according to Socrates, virtue is always its own reward. Consequently, to them, the sacrifices demanded by justice appear foolish and the person who chooses to make them, a fool. This simple analogy reveals a deep epistemic problem, however. If justice is in fact health of the soul, as Socrates' implies, and is therefore its own reward, like health, then it would seem a simple matter to recommend its value to others. But unlike health, its value cannot be known until it has

actually been obtained – until then it remains opaque; it is unclear, then, why anyone would seek it.

Here we meet a more serious, moral version of the epistemological puzzle from the *Meno*. There Socrates wondered how we can learn anything, since in order to learn we must inquire, and yet in order to inquire we must know what we are seeking; but to know what we are seeking is already to know what it is we aim to learn. One solution to this puzzle is the unsatisfactory theory of recollection. But another is present in the very behavior of Socrates in the dialogue. Meno's slave boy does not know the answer to the mathematical question Socrates asks him. Stuck in the vicious circle I have just described, it seems he could never learn it. To do so he would need to know already what he does not know. However, Socrates asks him leading questions: by linking each new discovery with what the boy does know, by making him grasp for what he can already see, if only dimly, from where he is, Socrates makes it possible for him to learn. In this way, a teacher can solve Meno's paradox so long as the student trusts him enough to be led by him.

And he must be trustworthy, especially when the cost of learning is high; for whenever it is, and whenever the goal of the learning must remain opaque until the student achieves it, he will not follow without trust. But of all the crafts, which exacts a higher fare to be learnt than the craft of justice, with its asceticism and submission to punishment? To learn it we must forego what seems pleasant to us at the beginning – the moral equivalents of pastries, for example, which we are all born loving – and strive for a goal whose pleasure we seek only because we trust our moral teacher enough to believe that someday they will be pleasant for us as well. He claims to enjoy this pleasure, and

recommends it above all others, despite its cost. To him, for instance, it will seem better to suffer injustice than to do it, since the price of suffering injustice will never outweigh the price of compromising his achievement of the supremely desirable goal of virtue. To him, furthermore, if ever he does wrong, it will seem better to be punished for it than to go unpunished, since the price in pain of punishment will never outweigh its motivational benefit toward the achievement of virtue. Indeed, to him, both of these claims will appear obvious; after all, he will have the testimony of his own experience, the pleasure he already takes in virtue.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates presents himself as someone who enjoys the rewards of virtue and who enjoins others to trust him to become their teacher, to lead them in an ascent from base pleasures to the finest of all pleasures, virtue itself (521e, 500c, 493c). The metaphor of ascent is appropriate, since the *Republic* will later immortalize this argument in the allegory of the cave. Callicles and the devotees of rhetoric are like those who have mastered the shadow-images on the cave wall: they have a knack for their flickering and can use this knack to become rich and powerful. Socrates is like someone who has climbed out of the cave, seen the Sun, and returned, squinting, to enjoin others to imitate his own ascent. He has no knack for the images, nor does he care to acquire one. For this neglect, he appears incompetent to those for whom the images seem real. Callicles accordingly scolds him for caring too little for his success in the city and too much for philosophy. Additionally, the ascent which Socrates enjoins involves evident pain in exchange for an unknown pleasure. How can cave-dwellers, for instance, appreciate the glory of the Sun when they have never seen anything but shadows? They cannot, and so would never turn round and seek it without trusting someone who knew it

himself. In just this way, Socrates urges Callicles to sacrifice ambition and rhetoric in order to pursue justice and philosophy. Without trust, Callicles has no motive to do so.

II: Callicles

So let us now imagine how all of these Socratic claims appear to someone like Callicles, someone outside the craft and without enough trust to enter it. Like Polus before him, he notoriously rejects Socrates' two moral claims, believing that it is better to do injustice than to suffer it, and that if one has done wrong it is better to go unpunished for it than to be punished. This rejection is best summarized by his first interjection: "Tell me Chaerephon, is Socrates in earnest about all this, or is he joking?" (481b7-8)

Yet he also rejects Socrates' central metaphysical claim, the claim that human nature is revealed in the behavior of those who have been apprenticed in the virtues within a well-regulated city. For Callicles believes instead that human nature is revealed by the unapprenticed -- he would say the untamed -- and by those without the regulations of a city. According to this claim, all human behavior can be explained as attempts to acquire untutored pleasures, like those of money and power. In this vein he says, "I think nature shows this, that it is just for the better man to have more than the worse, and the more powerful than the less powerful." (483d1-3; cf. 483a9-10)

Callicles was not alone in either this metaphysical belief or those moral beliefs: he was in the company of a whole generation of youths who had matured during the Peloponnesian War and had been instructed by itinerant sophists, like Gorgias himself. After all, Gorgias wrote in his *Encomium to Helen* that "it is the nature of things, not for

the strong to be hindered by the weak, but for the weaker to be ruled and drawn by the stronger, and for the stronger to lead and the weaker to follow." To his instruction might have been added the voice of Democritus: "By nature ruling belongs to the stronger" (DK 267); or perhaps that of Antiphon: "the demands of the laws are artificial, but the demands of nature are necessary" (Col. 1 (1-33H)); or many others. Now, just as we speculated about the epistemic position of Socrates, that position from which his claims would have seemed obvious, so too we should speculate about the epistemic position of Callicles, that position from which those very same claims would have seemed foolish.

And yet we have already indulged in a little such speculation. For if justice is indeed produced by craft, then those unapprenticed in it will view Socrates' preference for suffering rather than doing injustice as foolish, because they will not, because they cannot, desire the opaque goal which this craft pursues, the pleasure of being good. From their epistemic position, remember, it will seem as if Socrates and those like him choose asceticism for something chimerical: "justice". And wouldn't justice have appeared so to young Athenians who matured during the latter half of the fifth century?

After all, Herodotus had described the diverse moral codes of many far-flung peoples, making each thereby appear somewhat arbitrary; the Hippocratics were developing a materialistic approach to diseases such as epilepsy, the so-called "sacred disease," thereby undermining the dominion of the gods, guarantors of justice; finally, the Peloponnesian War offered a thirty-year spectacle of injustice which would have made it seem like quaint naivete. To begin with, the aggrandizement of the Athenian empire before the war would have offered a first example of how powerful people behave when they are free from regulation (i, 98). If this weren't enough, though, Athenian behaviour

during the war towards subject cities like Mytilene (iii, 40) or Melos (v, 95), cities too weak to threaten reprisals, would have offered many more similar examples. More striking even than these would have been the behaviour of Athenians at home during the plague, when the widespread feeling that life would be too short for punishment to take effect led people to act lawlessly and without remorse (ii, 52). And yet more striking still would have been the behaviour of the Corcyreans during their *stasis*. Then, without any regulations or fear of reprisals from a disintegrated government, debtors killed creditors, sons killed fathers, and suppliants were killed on the altars of temples. The weight of these numerous examples would have been enough to convince someone unapprenticed in the craft of justice, and thus without intimate knowledge its goal, to consider this craft a sham, and the maneuvers of *Realpolitik* and personal abandon, contrarily, to be true revelations of genuine human nature.

[However, there still remained the problem of Socrates. Once again, they must have wondered, how could someone otherwise so clever be in this respect so foolish? Sophistic instruction provided an answer. After all, many of the sophists and their protégés taught that justice and religion were artifices that arose as tools of manipulation. A tract attributed to Critias, for example, claims that humans began in what would later be called a state of nature, a state in which goodness was not rewarded and wickedness not punished. Next, laws and punishments were established for the sake of order, although even these could not control the secret plans and actions of people, so that "some clever and wise man" invented the fear of omniscient gods for this purpose. In short, the gods and, by extension, justice, were invented in order to manipulate people. We have this

answer from surviving sophistic tracts, but from Plato's reports of them as well. The character of Thrasymachus, for example, claims that rulers declare justice to be that very rule which they have instituted, then punishing those who disagree (338e); while the character of Protagoras similarly claims that "the mass of people notice nothing, but simply echo what the leaders tell them." (317a)]

III: A Semantic Gap

All of these sophistic teachings seemed to receive confirmation from the events of the Peloponnesian War like the Corcyrean *stasis*. Just as the clever and wise man of Critias' tract, the Corcyrean revolutionaries also developed increasingly sophisticated and effective techniques of manipulation; foremost among these techniques was the manipulation of meaning. Thus, for example, 'a thoughtless act of aggression' came to mean an instance of courage; '*sôphrosunê*' (moderation) came to mean an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; and 'an ability to understand a question from all sides' came to mean that one was totally unfit for action (iii, 82; cf. the Athenian speech to the Melians, v, 111, where *timê* undergoes a similar revision).

The Sophists and their protégés seem to have perceived these semantic changes as equivocations between nature and convention, and vice versa. [That is to say, they seem to have perceived them as *both* conversions of words denoting conventional virtues into words denoting natural vices -- i.e., vices only revealed as such in abnormal situations like *stasis* and plague -- *and* conversions of words denoting conventional vices into words denoting natural virtues -- i.e., virtues likewise only revealed as such in similarly

abnormal situations.] For when Callicles erupts for the first time in the *Gorgias* he begins by claiming that "mostly these are opposed to each other, nature and convention," (483a1) and then accuses Socrates of equivocating between them. This accusation, in fact, recognizes the semantic gap between these two rivals. "By nature," Callicles asserts, "everything is more *aischron* (shameful) which is also worse, like suffering injustice, but by convention doing injustice is more *aischron*." (483a8-9) Socrates and Callicles do not agree about morals or metaphysics, to be sure; but they do not even mean the same things by the moral and metaphysical words they use. This explains the abundant instances in the dialogue when they misunderstand each other (490d, 498d, 457c-e, 462c, 494e, 497c, 500d). “By Zeus,” protests Callicles, “I don’t know what you mean.” (498d)

IV: An Epistemic Gap

We are now at a point at which we may also appreciate fully the epistemic gap of the *Gorgias*. Socrates, on the one hand, thinks human nature and virtue are revealed in the behaviour of those who have been apprenticed in the craft of justice within a well-regulated city. His epistemology will accordingly regard the opinions of such people rather highly. But since Callicles, on the other hand, believes that human nature is revealed by those unapprenticed -- he would say untamed -- by justice, and by those free from the regulations of a city, he will scorn the opinions of those who have been thus apprenticed in the so-called virtues, most notably justice. They are not masters of a craft but dupes of an ideology.

With this contrast in mind, we can more easily understand why Socrates uses a dialectical epistemology, one which begins with the opinions of his fellow citizens, while Callicles, contrarily, uses a genealogical epistemology, one rather like that of Critias, since it attributes the origins of the opinions of his fellow citizens in a natural quest for immediate pleasures and consequent manipulation. Socrates' epistemology respects the opinions of his fellow citizens and even begins from them; Callicles' epistemology scorns these opinions and dismisses them from the beginning as ideological corruptions.

In their own ways, however, both Socrates and Callicles seem to recognize this gap. After all, Callicles' first response to Socrates' arguments with Polus, as we have seen, is to stutter: "Tell me, Socrates, are we to suppose you're in earnest now, or joking? For if you're in earnest, and all these things you say are really true, then wouldn't the life of us men be upside down?" (481b9-c3). And elsewhere, while Socrates is discussing similar topics with a disciple he says: "One should never do wrong in return, nor injure any man, whatever injury one has suffered at his hands. And Crito, see that you do not agree to this contrary to your belief. For I know that only a few people hold this view or will hold it, and there is no common ground between those who hold this view and those who do not, but they inevitably despise each other's views." (49c-d) Without common ground there is of course no rational method to resolve such a disagreement. And so, without this common ground, Socrates repeatedly insists that the others fight on his own.

IV: Stylistic Gap

After all, Socrates insists that all three of his interlocutors in this dialogue, Gorgias, Polus, and eventually Callicles, participate in the brief exchanges of dialectic while neglecting their preferred style of rthetoric. For just as the epistemologies of Socrates and Callicles are incommensurable, so too are their styles. The brief exchanges of dialectic are amenable to the revelation and comparison of interlocutors' conventional opinions and inimical to the elaboration of a subversive genealogy; it is quite the opposite with the prepared speeches of rhetoric.

Gorgias thus advises Socrates that "some answers require long speeches" (449c1). And Socrates later replies, "if you made long speeches and weren't willing to answer the question asked wouldn't it be hard on me?" (461e4-5) Therefore, just as the epistemologies of Socrates and Callicles confirm their respective moral and metaphysical claims, so too their conversational styles exemplify and even privilege their respective epistemologies. To adopt the dialectical style would privilege, as it does, the dialectical epistemology; to adopt the rhetorical style would privilege the genealogical epistemology. To privilege one style for this encounter is to unfairly predetermine its outcome.

And yet their encounter must have some style or other if they are to communicate at all -- whether it be a series of brief dialectical exchanges, a series of rhetorical speeches, or a mixture of both. When it is the first, of course, they fight on Socrates' ground; when it is the second they fight on Callicles'; but when it is the third, both, they

merely alternate between one ground and the other. The closest they can come to fairness, then, is to alternate styles, and this is more or less what happens throughout the dialogue. But this alternation can be only an approximation of fairness. After all, an alternation is merely unfair by turns. For which topics will they use Socrates' style, and for which Callicles'? Surely this will be important, since some topics are more important than others; and therefore, in all fairness, they should discuss this selection beforehand. But in what style will they discuss this selection? In Socrates' style or in Callicles'? This too will require discussion, and so too will this, *ad infinitum*.

Despite this limit, alternation is nevertheless the closest approximation to fairness. Curiously, it is in this alternation between stichomythia and speeches that Plato approaches most closely to Attic drama, especially Euripides, who likewise presented incommensurable positions. Consider only the clash of Pentheus and Bacchus in his *Bacchae*. There can be no resolution of such a clash but tragedy; nothing short of a *deus ex machina* can bridge such a gap. None appears in the *Bacchae*, and none appears in the *Gorgias*. This is therefore a tragic dialogue.

Later dialogues -- the *Symposium* and the *Republic* -- arguably supply a *deus ex machina*: that is, a very sophisticated epistemology which not only presents gaps fairly but also manages to bridge them. In the meantime, however, Callicles becomes the tragic victim and gradually acquiesces in the face of Socrates' insistent examination. Losing heart, he finally replies: "You're so insistent, Socrates. Listen to me and let this discussion go, or have a dialogue with someone else as well" (505d5-6) Such outcomes are common in Plato. When Socrates and Thrasymachus first clash, for example, the sophist requests an approximation of fairness with these impetuous words: "So either allow me to speak,

or, if you want to ask questions, go ahead, and I'll say, 'All right,' and nod yes and no, as one does to old wives' tales." (350e) But after Socrates has cowed him, he too resigns himself: "Enjoy your banquet of words! Have no fear, I won't oppose you. That would make these people hate me." (352b) And similarly, after Protagoras, has been cowed by Socrates, he too resigns himself with these words: "You seem bent on having your own way, Socrates, and getting me to give the answers; so to humor you . . ." (360e) Socrates likewise cows Gorgias, Polus, and even hot-blooded Callicles in turn. By the end of this dialogue, therefore, Socrates must resort to play-acting a conversation with himself and then, finally, to telling long stories about the after-life. All the Sophists have now fallen silent, and Socrates, the last actor on stage, can speak only monologues.

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