Socratic Wisdom in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*

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Those fortunate enough to have studied Sophocles with Dr. Hankey will recall his approach to Teiresias in *Oedipus the King*. Teiresias exhibits a peculiar kind of knowing: he has a grasp of everything but only as a whole; to know particular things, he has to be brought into contact with them. Thus he says, as he first appears on stage, that he had forgotten why he was coming, or he would not have come at all. It is through his contact with Oedipus that his wisdom concerning Oedipus' situation comes out. I want to show here that the Socrates of the *Gorgias* and the *Republic* has a similar kind of wisdom: Plato has presented him as changing in reaction to whichever character confronts him. When confronted with certain characters, Socrates simply tries to elicit their views. Against others, he actively puts forth doctrines of his own, though in a deeply inadequate fashion. Against others still, he puts forth doctrines of his own, but in a far more adequate fashion. The wisdom he displays in these two dialogues thus has a nature similar to that of Teiresias: it is not simply a product of its possessor's active investigations but comes from a kind of inspiration that is dependent on a particular stimulus to produce a particular content. On this basis, it will prove possible to reconcile the fact that Socrates sets out considerable positive philosophical content in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic* with his claim in the *Apology* that "all wisdom belongs to God."

Years ago, E. R. Dodds drew attention to the peculiar structure of the *Gorgias*: the three main characters with whom Socrates speaks in the *Gorgias* "do not represent three distinct forces… but three successive developments of the same force: Polus is the spiritual heir of Gorgias, Callicles is the spiritual heir of Polus. Accordingly, each takes up the discussion where his predecessor broke down, carries it to a deeper level, and shows that it

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involves wider issues."[1] Something similar is clearly at work in the *Republic* as Socrates speaks with Cephalus, Polemarchus and Thrasymachus, for there too the conversation becomes ever more substantial as we move forward – and increasingly acrimonious as well. There is no need to demonstrate in any detail the fact of a three-step change in the character of the discussion in these two dialogues as Socrates speaks with three different characters, for it is neither novel nor controversial.

Less often noticed is the fact that Socrates himself undergoes changes in response to the different characters who confront him: he *mirrors* his opponents in these dialogues. Above all, he becomes more active as each dialogue progresses. In both cases, he is at first recognisable as the fellow from the early dialogues, exhibiting no knowledge of his own but seeking rather to acquire it from others. He begins expressing his wish "to learn" from Gorgias (πυθέσθαι παρ' αὐτοῦ – 447c1) or Cephalus (the same word – πυνθάνομαι – 328e5), and proceeds only to ask questions in the encounters with these two characters. However, once they have been left behind, Socrates begins to exhibit what seems to be knowledge of his own.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates is confronted at the start with the most complacent of his three opponents: Gorgias asserts a series of ethical obligations – at 456c6–457c3 the word δεῖ occurs 6 times, in the sense "one ought" – but he does so in an unreflective fashion, as though such obligations can simply be taken for granted. In conspicuous contrast with what is to follow, there is no explicit discussion of any considerations that might move people to ignore an assertion that "one ought" to act in a given way. Also in conspicuous contrast with what is to follow, Socrates does not put forth doctrines of his own. In this first section of the dialogue he is at his least active, content simply to examine Gorgias in a critical manner.

After Polus intervenes, a change in Socrates quickly becomes apparent, for the young man decides he would like to pose, rather than answer questions. As a result, Socrates begins to set forth

1 Dodds (1990: 5).

views of his own (462b–465e): we are presented with an elaborate schema of skills and knacks, in which the former are distinguished from the latter by virtue of possessing a rational grasp of their subject matter. This schema is to some degree the consequence of the admission which separates Polus from Gorgias.[2] Socrates soon goes a bit further (466b–481b), for he begins actively to put forth new claims of his own which do *not* follow from what Polus has already said, and which face opposition and even ridicule from Polus.

The first of these is Socrates' claim that there is a distinction to be made between wanting (βούλομαι) and thinking fit (δοκεῖν – 466e1–2) to do something (466b–468e). In response, Polus suggests that it is desirable to be able to kill, rob or imprison whomever one thinks fit (468e). This brings to light a problem with the standpoint we saw earlier in Gorgias, i.e., that "one ought" to act in a certain way: what if these ethical obligations conflict with our interests? Polus soon proves to be an admirer of Archelaus, and the whole point of the example he makes of the man's career (471a–c) is to drive home the disjunction of an individual's interests and generally accepted ethical obligations: it is precisely by ignoring these obligations that Archelaus does so well for himself. The question at issue has thus been deepened since the conversation with Gorgias. As these views and this deeper question come to light, Socrates begins to put forward doctrines of his own that are a radical departure from common-sense thinking, as the βούλομαι/δοκεῖν distinction was not: he claims that it is worse to commit than to suffer injustice (469b–475e), that it is worse for one who has done injustice to escape punishment than to be punished (476a–479c), and finally, that rhetoric is useful for bringing punishment upon oneself and one's friends, when wrong has been done, and for causing one's enemies to avoid it in the same situation (480a–481b). It is appropriate in this context to remind ourselves that Socrates is "the philosopher whose wisdom

2 As Kahn (1983: 85) has noted.

consists in the fact that he knows nothing:"[3] clearly there has been a significant change since the conversation with Gorgias. More than this, however, the views put forth by Socrates are remarkable for their complete opposition not only to Polus' beliefs but also to the beliefs held by the great majority of all people. To attain such an antinomian perspective, and to be able to hold onto it in argument, is to display no inconsiderable activity of thought. In the argument against Polus, then, we see a progression within Socrates, as he first gives his own views having been asked for them, then without having been asked, and finally he puts forth radically antinomian claims in the face of considerable opposition and even ridicule.

As Callicles sets out his own position, we see a standpoint from which the problem suggested by Polus – the conflict of interest and justice – has been resolved: 'justice,' as Callicles would understand it, is indubitably in our interest (assuming that we are "the stronger"). In addition, Callicles takes the matter further, for when he introduces his 'natural' justice, he calls into question the credibility of *any* ethical obligation of the sort mentioned by Gorgias – that is, quite apart from the question of our interests, why should we believe at all an assertion that "one ought" to act in a given way?

Against Callicles, Socrates becomes still more active. It is pertinent to keep in mind an admonition he made at the start of the argument with Polus: "would I not suffer something terrible, if I am not allowed to go away and not listen to you?" (461e–462a). By 497a, Callicles would very much like to go away and not listen, but Socrates (and Gorgias) *will not let Callicles go* (see also 505c–506c). Indeed, Socrates reaches a point (506c–509c) at which he alone *is* the argument, since Callicles wants nothing to do with it.[4] Thus Socrates attains his highest peak of activity against Callicles, completing a development that began with him simply wanting to learn from Gorgias.

3 As Beversluis (2000: 319) does.

4 Klosko (1983: 580) makes a similar point. See also Dodds (1990: 16–17).

But another change is evident in the argument against Callicles, this one involving the substance of the position put forth by Socrates. Certainly he set out views of his own against Polus, but what exactly he meant there was far from clear. That is, however convinced one may be (or not be) by the argument that purported to show that it is worse to do than to suffer injustice (469b–475e), still Socrates did not give this claim any content. We are given a good idea of what it means to suffer injustice – being put to the rack, having one's eyes burnt out, etc. (473c) – but this can hardly be what Socrates is looking to when he claims that one state of affairs is preferable to its opposite. What exactly does Socrates have in mind here? What makes one state of affairs 'worse' and another better?

It is in response to the challenge posed by Callicles that we get an answer to these questions. Callicles, of course, grasps the preceding argument in terms of the principles – *nomos* and *phusis* – that underlie it (482c–483a). He also shows himself interested in grounding his own understanding of how one should act in reality, rather than in what he calls "papers, trickery and spells" (484a4–5). That is, he explains how "nature herself shows" (483c9) that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, and he appeals to the animal kingdom and to history to make his case (483d). His account, then, is not merely the opinion of one man (or many), but is grounded in the real world, and so it has a claim to credibility that Gorgias' repeated phrase "one ought" simply did not have. This poses a problem for Socrates, for it begins to look as though his claim that it is better to suffer than to commit injustice might have no foundation at all in reality. The question suggested above – what does Socrates have in mind in claiming one thing is better than another? – thus becomes all the more pressing and difficult, for if he is to meet the challenge of Callicles head on, Socrates must not only give an account of what makes one thing better than another, he must also do this in a manner that meets the implicit challenge of giving a doctrine a basis in reality, showing that his own position is no less credible than that of Callicles.

Socrates proves equal to the challenge. Once the argument has arrived at an agreement concerning fundamental principles – specifically, that pleasure and the good are not the same thing

(499c) – he begins to put forth a case that is grounded in realities familiar to everyone from everyday life. For our purpose here, the pertinent example comes when we are given an account of what it means for something to be good (503d–505b), and this account finds confirmation in a readily observable order of the world. The craftsman, we are told, aims to produce in his work some form, setting it in some arrangement, and forcing each part to fit with and be suitable to every other, so as to produce something structured and ordered (503e7–504a2). This idea is specifically contrasted with that of acting at random (εἰκῇ – 503e1, 3; see also 506d6). This is not a merely abstract claim but rather a familiar reality of everyday life: skilled activity does in fact seem to be characterised by the production of order, and this is not only true of human inventions, such as ships or houses, but also of attempts to improve the body, whether through training or medicine. A poorly-built house will leak, allow drafts, or collapse; a well-made ship will better survive a storm; the trainer might aim to correct a muscle imbalance. Even the move from order and structure as productive of health and strength in the body to the same things as productive in the soul of mental health and strength (504b–c) is a highly plausible one, and does seem to conform to many facts of life: people who simply act at random, who are utterly unpredictable, seem mad; those who have regulated their passions, and are capable of self-control, can respond reliably to even the most stressful situations. There does seem to be a notion of 'good' according to which many things – perhaps all – are better off when they attain the order appropriate to their nature; skilled activity aims to produce this. Accordingly, we can see that Socrates is not merely more active in putting forth his own doctrines as the dialogue progresses, but also provides a fuller and more adequate account of those doctrines in the end. As he moves from a merely complacent opponent to someone who has done a good deal of thinking about ethical matters, Socrates becomes increasingly philosophical in response.

The *Republic* paints a complementary picture. Here the movement through three characters is remarkable in particular for the increasingly direct relationship each character has to the

good. Socrates asks a question of Cephalus concerning the greatest *good* (ἀγαθός – 330d2) that wealth has brought him, and Cephalus responds that the most *useful* thing (χρησιμώτατος – 331b9) is the ability to avoid defrauding others. That is, Cephalus displays no active interest in the good. Polemarchus brings out the word good (ἀγαθός – 332a10) at the very moment he is no longer allowed to rely on the authority of Simonides and must think for himself. For Polemarchus, good is a characteristic of actions – that is, one does good to friends and evil to enemies. Thrasymachus talks at first of advantage but begins to talk of good (ἀγαθός – 343b4, c4) in the course of a great outburst in which he says what he really thinks and praises injustice and tyranny. The good, for Thrasymachus, is something one gets, whether material possessions or praise from other people. As we shall see, Socrates changes as he is confronted with these differing relationships to the good.

Having attempted simply to elicit Cephalus' views, Socrates' questioning of Polemarchus takes on a rather different character, for he is starting to nudge his opponent in a particular direction. Polemarchus is interested in doing good to friends and harm to enemies, a view that threatens to take an instrumental view of other people. The four arguments Socrates brings against him begin with a focus on the useful and gradually turn us away from the instrumental towards what is simply good. The first argument brings out the inadequacy of Polemarchus' conception of justice from the perspective of utility: it is "*use*less in *use* and *use*ful in dis*use*" (emphasis mine – ἐν μὲν χρήσει ἄχρηστος, ἐν δὲ ἀχρηστίᾳ χρήσιμος – 333d12; recall Cephalus' use of χρήσιμος above). The second argument concludes that Polemarchan justice is "a kind of theft" (334b5) – that is, it is at best ambiguous as regards goodness. The third argument (334c–335a), leads Polemarchus away from a view of friends as those who merely seem good to a view that demands that they are in fact good. In the final argument against Polemarchus (335b–e), Socrates goes farther than this, for he produces a dense argument that includes two concepts – function (ἔργον) and virtue (ἀρετή) – that look ahead to the rest of the *Republic*. These represent active additions on

the part of Socrates, corresponding to nothing in Polemarchus' argument, and their introduction serves as an argument that replaces Polemarchus' view, according to which justice might help or harm, with a view according to which it can only do good. In addition, Socrates' argument does not only concern justice, for it implicitly introduces a more general, teleological conception of the world that will be included in subsequent Socratic arguments.

Against Thrasymachus, who is far more active in argument than Polemarchus, Socrates also becomes more active, putting forward his own theory of the arts in the argument from the "precise sense." This theory builds on the final argument against Polemarchus: there is now said to be a single function to each skill (see 346d6). The doctor – at least the precise doctor – cannot make people ill. After this novel understanding of skills has produced a tirade from Thrasymachus (343b–344c), Socratic activity increases still further for he gives an extended counter-speech (347b–e) of his own. This counter-speech puts forth Socrates' own conception of the good, for here he speaks of a city of good men (πόλις ἀνδρῶν ἀγαθῶν – 347d2–3). That is, the good for Socrates is not something external that must be acquired, nor is it something done to others but has rather to do with what people *are* (at 348d3–4 Socrates will talk about "being good" – εἶναι ἀγαθοὶ). The final three arguments that are made after this are not an attempt to respond to Thrasymachus on his own terms, for they proceed on the basis of the Socratic notion of 'good,' one that Thrasymachus neither understands nor accepts. These final arguments of book I thus constitute a development of Socrates' own thought at least as much as a criticism of his opponent. Each of these arguments gives some further insight into the good as Socrates understands it: here Socratic philosophic activity reaches its highest point in book I.

Thus Socrates begins book I with an attempt simply to elicit the views of another and ends it with an attempt actively to assert his own thought in the face of resistance. Plato has indicated the cause of this Socratic development, for he has included ample detail by which we can see that Socrates is mirroring his opponent at each step, becoming more active in response to each of them. Let us march once

more through the movement of the first book from this perspective.

Cephalus begins the conversation in a welcoming and pleasant manner, and Socrates replies in kind. He goes further than this, however, making clear that he sees in Cephalus a source of insight (328d9–e8), and then, after the old man has made a speech, expressing wonder at the insight provided (329d8). The conversation is characterised by continual agreement on both sides, to such an extent that even Socrates' criticism of Cephalus is preceded by the words, "you speak splendidly" (331c1). Nothing like this is found later in the work, for Cephalus himself is not present later in the work: Socrates is mirroring both the old man's manners and also the *manner of knowing* that defines Cephalus. That is, for Cephalus, the whole ethical world is taken as *given*: it comes from the authority of tradition, and from great figures such as Pindar, Sophocles and Themistocles. It is precisely *not* grasped as the result of an active intellect rigourously making sense of the world. Just as Cephalus *simply accepts* the authority of poets and great men, so too does Socrates *simply accept* almost all of what Cephalus says. Critical demands of the sort that Socrates will later make of Polemarchus and Thrasymachus are absent except in Socrates' single direct criticism of Cephalus. Even in that criticism there is a difference with what follows, for the older man allows some truth to his opponents (329e2–7). This allowance of truth is itself mirrored by Socrates, who does not say that Cephalus' conception of justice is simply false, but suggests instead that it is sometimes right and sometimes wrong. After Cephalus departs, Socrates swiftly ceases to be so generous.

Socrates proceeds to mirror Polemarchus as well, not only by proceeding with a genuine argument rather than an agreeable discussion, but also in his implicit acceptance of the identity of certain concepts that are in fact quite different: "the owed and the fitting" (ὀφειλόμενον καὶ προσῆκον – 332c6–7, c11) as well as the good and the useful (ἀγαθὸς καὶ χρήσιμος – 331b1, 333b4–5, b7, c7). That is, Socrates gives expression to these concepts *as they are present to Polemarchus*. This applies also to Socrates' treatment of skills at this point in the argument, which

he paints (333e–334a) as equally capable of doing harm and good: this fits precisely Polemarchus' conception of justice, which also can do harm and good.[5] The conflicted and paradoxical view suggested by each of these examples coheres with the younger man's situation: "when we come to Polemarchus we pass from the old generation... to a new generation which has inherited the experience of the old, but in a partial way."[6]

Against Thrasymachus, we no longer have a straightforward argument as we did with Polemarchus, so Socrates no longer mirrors the views of his opponent. Thrasymachus sees the argument as a sort of zero-sum game in which one side must win, and Socrates responds to this by turning to *eristic* argument: now we have a sort of verbal combat, in which the end is victory rather than the attainment of truth.[7] This includes insults: Thrasymachus calls Socrates 'offensive' (βδελυρὸς – 338d), a 'slanderer' (Συκοφάντης – 340d) and even a nonentity (οὐδεν ὢν – 341c), and Socrates responds with some sarcastic words of his own (ἄριστε – 338d; σοφώτατε – 339e; μακάριε – 341b). It is no wonder that in this context we have "an unusually combative Socrates"[8] – and also no wonder that Socrates does not go far beyond what is needed to silence his opponent (i.e., we get a much shorter and less adequate account than we will see once Socrates speaks with Glaucon and Adeimantus).

At every stage, then, Socrates mirrors his opponent. The changes we see in Socrates are thus to be understood as *reactions* not only to the demands of the argument, but also to the nature of the individual with whom he finds himself confronted.

5 Dorter (2006: 28) has noted this particular correspondence.

6 Nettleship (1962: 16).

7 See Klosko (1984), who has shown in some detail how we have an eristic argument in the encounter with Thrasymachus.

8 Beversluis (2000: 221).

By this point, the connection of all this with my mention of Teiresias at the beginning should be clear: just as Teiresias is dependent on a particular encounter to produce particular insights, so too is Socrates in these two dialogues dependent for his original views on the particular characters he encounters. In the course of the discussion with Cephalus, Socrates provides virtually no original insight. The argument with Polemarchus brings out of Socrates a hint concerning the proper orientation towards the good, though of course neither of these first two characters succeed in driving Socrates to give his own conception of the good. It is only when he encounters Thrasymachus that Socrates produces a great flood of original argument, culminating in a glimpse of the good as something people can *be*.

The same idea is at work in the *Gorgias*. The argument with Gorgias himself produces very little from Socrates. Polus does provoke him into making original arguments, but these arguments are merely abstract: although Polus is not able to ward off the conclusion that suffering injustice is better than doing it, Socrates fails to give this claim any content. Why would Socrates make an argument with such a failing? Why would he be content with a refutation of Polus that is nothing more than a verbal victory if he had a fuller answer at his fingertips? An answer can be found in the suggestion that Polus is "the stupidest of all interlocutors with whom Socrates converses throughout Plato's works."[9] A more intelligent character might have inspired Socrates to go further. It is in response to Callicles that Socrates is driven to produce his own account of what it means for something to be good, as well as the lengthy argument that proceeds from this.

Socrates speaks, then, from a kind of inspiration, though it is not entirely the same as what we find in Teiresias. Socratic wisdom certainly involves an active, inquisitive and discursive spirit concerned with critical examination, but it also contains a substantial passive element. We do not see him simply begin

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9 Nicholson (1999: 39).

to hold forth on philosophical matters, setting out his own doctrines. On the contrary, when confronted with the wrong sort of character, Socrates gives us little or nothing. He gives us a sort of reflection of whatever character confronts him, so he needs to come into contact with an active mind before he can begin to present a positive philosophy. Accordingly, even at his greatest activity in these two dialogues, there is a passivity, for he only becomes active as a result of receiving the activity of another.

In fact, even Thrasymachus and Callicles prove to have real shortcomings, and thus can produce from Socrates only limited wisdom. Both are sufficiently intelligent and demanding that they provoke him into producing original doctrines and arguments, but these give us little more than an image of what we are to encounter beginning in book II of the *Republic*. Against Callicles and Thrasymachus, Socrates is able to get away with arguments that take certain premises as simply given, with the result that the doctrines he sets out there are established on an uncertain footing. In the *Gorgias* and the first book of the *Republic*, we are given a sketch of what is to come, a sort of prolegomena to philosophy, but not more than this. It is only after the first book of the *Republic*, when Socrates is confronted by the yet-more-demanding figures of Glaucon and Adeimantus, that he will be compelled to embark upon a far more searching and thoroughgoing investigation, one that produces considerably more satisfying results.

With all of this in front of us, we can see how Plato has used the figure of a changing Socrates in these two dialogues to mediate between the character who knew only that he knew nothing and the Socrates of the *Republic* who seems to be bursting with knowledge – and between the Socrates who said that "wisdom belongs to the god" and the wisdom that we find in the same man's mouth in the *Republic*. The two dialogues we have considered here show us Socrates in transition from one state to the other, but more than this, they suggest how both can coexist. The positive philosophical content he gives us seems to be present as the result of a sort of inspiration, as something that flows through him when he happens to come into contact

with an individual of the right sort, who makes a demand of the right sort. Accordingly, Socrates can be said to have wisdom, and yet its source lies beyond him, a gift, we can infer, of the god.

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