

HERTOG 2020 Political Studies Program VIRTUE & POWER

PLATO'S *GORGIAS*

Bryan Garsten, professor, Yale University
Benjamin Storey, professor, Furman University

Young people with ambitions often want to lead politically successful lives that are also morally serious lives. Is this possible? Can we both do well and be good? Or do the demands of political life, the needs of the community, and the dilemmas of leadership make ordinary morality impossible for those who seek power and influence?

In this opening week to the Hertog Political Studies Program, we will engage with these questions through a close reading of Plato's *Gorgias*. We will reflect on the ethical dilemmas implied by the pursuit of power, in politics and other realms, and on how we should conduct ourselves in a world in which the demands of justice and the demands of political necessity often seem to conflict.

Books:

- Plato, *Gorgias*, from *Plato's Gorgias and Aristotle's Rhetoric*, trans. Joe Sachs (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009)

Discussants: Discussants are assigned to specific questions below and should be ready to offer a reflective response to their assigned question during the seminar. Discussants do not need to prepare a formal written response, but they are encouraged to work from personal notes.

Resources

To learn more about the ideas and figures discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: **The Great Thinkers** (<http://thegreatthinkers.org/>) and **Contemporary Thinkers** (<http://contemporarythinkers.org/>) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.

Monday, June 15, 2020

Session 1: Socrates & Gorgias

Readings:

- Introduction; Plato, *Gorgias*, 447A–461B

Questions:

1. What is the context of the conversation described in Plato's *Gorgias*, insofar as you can discern it from the details of the text? Who are the characters?

2. What does Socrates hope to learn from Gorgias?
3. What is the power of rhetoric, according to Gorgias?
4. Socrates continually refers to “our speech,” in his conversation with Gorgias; what does he mean and why does he insist upon it?
5. What are the two kinds of persuasion, according to Socrates?
6. What is the relationship between rhetoric and justice?
7. How does Gorgias ultimately contradict his own argument?

Wednesday, June 17, 2020

Session 2: Socrates & Polus

Readings:

- Plato, *Gorgias*, 461B–486D

Questions:

1. Why does Polus interject himself into the conversation at 461B?
2. What does Polus believe to be the source of Gorgias’ self-contradiction?
3. How does Socrates define rhetoric?
4. Make a chart of Socrates’ analogy of the true and spurious arts of body and soul.
5. What does Socrates mean by his distinction between a human being “doing what seems good to him” and “doing what he wants”?
6. Upon what, according to Socrates, does human happiness depend?
7. What is Polus’ example of Archelaus intended to prove?
8. How does Socrates bring Polus to agree that the proper use of rhetoric is to bring accusations against one’s loved ones or oneself, if they are guilty of any injustice, although, as Polus says, “it seems crazy”? Is it in fact crazy?
9. Why does Callicles doubt whether Socrates is serious? Do you think Socrates is serious?
10. What, according to Callicles, is Socrates’ technique for getting people to refute themselves? Does he accurately describe what goes on in the conversational portions of the dialogue?
11. What, according to Callicles, is “just by nature”?
12. What does Callicles believe to be the proper place of philosophy in the life of an *anér*, a “real man”?

Friday, June 19, 2019

Session 3: Socrates & Callicles

Readings:

- Plato, *Gorgias*, 486D–506B

Questions:

1. What characteristics does Socrates attribute to Callicles in describing him as a touchstone upon which to test his own soul? Does Callicles truly seem to possess these characteristics?

2. Socrates easily finds examples to disprove Callicles' argument that "the one who's greater should carry off the things that belong to the lesser." What would be the best version of Callicles' argument?
3. What is Callicles' definition of "virtue and happiness"?
4. Callicles likens the life Socrates recommends to that of a "stone or a corpse," that is, to something that is not alive at all. Socrates likens the life Callicles recommends to the continual replenishing of an urn full of holes. Is there such a thing as a *life* that is something better than continual succession of filling and emptying?
5. Callicles rapidly tires of answering what he calls Socrates' "shriveled little questions." Why does Gorgias encourage him to go on?
6. How does Socrates finally bring Callicles to admit that the pleasant and the good are not the same thing?
7. Is there an art of seeking the human good?
8. What, according to Socrates, would be the aim of a healthy art of rhetoric?
9. What is Socrates' critique of the greatest Athenian statesmen—Themistocles, Miltiades, Cimon, and Pericles?

Tuesday, June 23, 2020

Session 4: Socrates

Readings:

- Plato, *Gorgias*, 506B–527E

Questions:

1. What, according to Socrates, produces the good of a thing?
2. What does Socrates mean when he suggests that the source of Callicles' error is his neglect of geometry?
3. What must one do to avoid suffering injustice in a city, on Socrates' account?
4. Why does Callicles find it "galling" that "someone who's worthless" can take "a good and beautiful life" from an innocent man? Given his previously stated opinions, shouldn't he find that state of affairs natural and unobjectionable?
5. How, according to Socrates, is rhetoric akin to helmsmanship?
6. How does the comparison Socrates makes between rhetoric and medicine at 512D compare to the relation between the two indicated by the larger analogy he makes at 465B–D?
7. Callicles remarks that "something about what you're saying seems good to me, Socrates—I don't know what it is—but I'm having the experience most people do: I'm not entirely persuaded by you." Do you share his experience of being divided in your reactions to Socrates? What is the source of this division?
8. How can Socrates claim to be "one of a few Athenians, not to say the only one, to make an attempt at the political art in the true sense," although he famously steers clear of Athenian politics (521B)?
9. Socrates concludes the dialogue with a speech he calls a "logos" but says that Callicles will consider a "mythos." What is the difference?
10. What, according to Socrates' story, is death?

11. What is the nature of the judgment made by Rhadamanthus, Aeacus, and Minos? Why are three dead, naked judges necessary, and why must human souls be judged when naked and dead?
12. Where does the conclusion of the dialogue leave Callicles, Polus, and Gorgias?

Friday, June 26, 2020

Session 5: *The Gorgias*

Readings:

- Review the *Gorgias* in its entirety

Questions:

1. What happens in Plato's *Gorgias*? Does anyone learn anything?
2. How does Socrates manage to get people to bear witness against themselves?
3. For the last fourth of the dialogue, Socrates speaks almost alone, and Callicles has long since given up on the conversation. Why does Socrates continue? Is he beating a dead horse?
4. Throughout the *Gorgias*, Socrates makes extreme arguments. Are there moderate versions of Socrates' arguments that seem more plausible? If so, why does he take such extreme positions?
5. What can this dialogue, set in a strange context and a distant time, teach us about power, virtue, and the proper use of speech in politics?