

GORGIAS 466a4–468e5:
RHETORIC'S INADEQUATE MEANS

DAVID WOLFSDORF

INTRODUCTION

LITERARY OR DRAMATIC APPROACHES to Plato's dialogues have been on the rise over the last decade. These are often distinguished from so-called analytic approaches, which focus on the arguments within the texts. For instance, the blurb introducing R. M. Dancy's recent study of Plato's early theory of Forms runs: "Scholars of Plato are divided between those who emphasize the literature of the dialogues and those who emphasize the argument of the dialogues . . . [this book] focuses on the arguments."¹

In view of the obvious literary and dramatic qualities of Plato's texts, one might applaud the groundswell of literary and dramatic interpretations. Moreover, any texts as complex as Plato's should attract and warrant multiple interpretative approaches. But this division of labor is symptomatic of fundamental and persistent misunderstanding. Argumentation is central to most of Plato's writings; thus, it is hard to see how literary interpretations can wholly ignore this dimension of the texts. Likewise, arguments are always conducted between literary characters within dramatic settings; thus, it is hard to see how analytic interpretations can wholly ignore this dimension of the texts. The problem is that Platonic scholarship currently lacks the conceptual tools to do the integrative work it needs to do to render accurate accounts of the dialogues. On the one hand, more work needs to be done to explain how the literary and dramatic elements relate to the argumentation. On the other hand, more work needs to be done to explain the various kinds of arguments Plato composes, in other words, the various ways in which Plato uses arguments in the dialogues. Perhaps the distinction between these two veins is merely a matter of emphasis. In any event, the present essay can be viewed as an effort in the latter vein.

The article examines one argument from one dialogue, *Gorgias* 466a4–468e5. This argument has received significant attention in the last two decades because it is believed to contain important material regarding Socrates' or Plato's early conception of desire. Moreover, this topic is important because in the early dialogues philosophy is as much a matter of motivation as it is

1. Dancy 2004.

of the object toward which the philosopher is motivated. In the course of the *Gorgias* argument Socrates claims that:

(D) Everyone desires the good.

It is believed that this claim represents a central tenet of Plato's early philosophical psychology. But it is highly controversial what Socrates' claim means.² Through much of the twentieth century (D) received the following so-called Neoplatonic interpretation: the real or actual good is the object of desire of the true self or of the genuine or true motivational state of all people.³ In 1984, however, Kevin McTighe called into question all previous contributions in a searching defense of the thesis that the *Gorgias* argument is *ad hominem*.⁴ In so doing, McTighe rejected the view that Socrates' statement of (D) could be used as evidence of Plato's philosophical psychology.

In 1991 Terry Penner propounded the even bolder view that the argument is not only not *ad hominem*, but that it involves a Socratic conception of desire radically at odds with most of the subsequent Western philosophical tradition.⁵ Penner's position depends upon a radical revision that is bound up with a distinctive conception of the individuation of actions. Penner claims that for Socrates the ultimate end of all humans' desires is what is really good, namely true happiness, "even if [that] is different from what [they] think it is."⁶ Importantly, Penner's position does not depend on reference to a true self or genuine motivational state:

Consider what parents want for their children when, as usually, they "want what is best for them." Is this wanting what is best for one's children identifiable with wanting what one *thinks* is best for them? I think not. For it is an exceptionally obtuse parent that thinks it very likely that what the *parent* thinks best for the child will be what is in fact best for the child. . . . [W]hat parents want for their children is what really *is* best for their children, even if what is really best differs from what the parents or children think best. So why shouldn't it be the case that what I want for *myself* is: what is really best for me *even if that differs from what I think it is*?⁷

Furthermore, Penner argues that Socrates "individuates actions by means of a totality of attributes *that includes consequences*."⁸ Accordingly, if a man pursues a course of action, falsely believing that action to be conducive to his true happiness, then that man does not desire that action.⁹

2. Aside from treatments in commentaries such as Dodds' (1959, 232–37) and Irwin's (1979, 137–47), the argument has received four sustained examinations: McTighe 1984; Penner 1991; Weiss 1992; Segvic 2000. See also Weiss 1985.

3. For example, Dodds 1959, 235–36; see McTighe 1984, 195–96 nn. 8, 9, 11, for other references. For a recent commitment to the Neoplatonic interpretation, see Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 85; on the descriptor "Neoplatonic," see McTighe 1984, 198–99 nn. 18–19.

4. McTighe 1984 (reprinted in Benson 1992); see also Weiss's reply (1985). Some notable contributions prior to McTighe's include Santas 1964 (reprinted in Santas 1979); Hall 1971; and Nakhnikian 1973.

5. Penner 1991.

6. *Ibid.*, 195.

7. *Ibid.*, 193.

8. Penner and Rowe 1994, 8 n. 14, with my emphasis.

9. Penner's view can be more fully clarified by comparison with the so-called subjectivist interpretation of (D), according to which all people desire objects that they believe to be good, whether or not these objects are actually good, on which see Santas 1964 and 1979 and Nakhnikian 1973. Consider the following

Despite its extraordinary character, Penner's paper has provoked relatively little reaction.¹⁰ McTighe's account currently seems to be more widely accepted. Still, Penner has found a prominent supporter in Rowe, and the two have extended their novel conception of Socratic desire to an interpretation of *Meno* 77–78.¹¹

In 1992 Roslyn Weiss defended a different *ad hominem* account of the *Gorgias* argument. Probably because it appeared a year after Penner's, it does not cite or engage Penner's position. But in opposition to McTighe, Weiss claims that Socrates' argument is not merely attempting to “to shatter Polus' misplaced confidence in his own wisdom”; rather, its objective is “to disabuse him of a particularly noxious view he shamelessly advances,” namely that the power to kill, confiscate, and banish citizens is a good thing.¹² Weiss claims that the first movement of the argument is valid and that the second movement is invalid, but that its invalidity is an “unfortunate, but unavoidable side-effect of Socrates' carefully crafted step-by-step approach to weaning Polus away” from his noxious view.¹³

Finally, in 2000 Heda Segvic contributed a stimulating discussion of the Socratic thesis that no one errs willingly that includes an appendix on the second movement of the *Gorgias* argument (467c5–468e5).¹⁴ Like Penner, Segvic interprets the argument as an alethic¹⁵ effort in which Socrates introduces the following novel conception of wanting (or desiring):

I (Socratically) want to ϕ only if my wanting to ϕ is linked to my recognition of the goodness of ϕ -ing; if it is a mere coincidence that I believe that ϕ -ing is the right thing to do and that ϕ -ing in fact is the right thing to do, my wanting to ϕ is not Socratic wanting.¹⁶

example: Assume marrying an heiress is in fact conducive to John's true happiness and that John desires to marry an heiress, but that John falsely believes Mary to be an heiress. On the subjectivist interpretation, John desires to marry Mary, for Mary appears to John to be an heiress. In contrast, on Penner's interpretation, John does not desire to marry Mary, even though he believes that Mary is an heiress and that marrying an heiress is conducive to true happiness, for he desires true happiness and, contrary to what he believes, marrying Mary is not conducive to true happiness.

10. Segvic (2000) dismisses Penner's argument at 11 n. 15.

11. Penner and Rowe 1994. Notably, Weiss's book (2001) on *Meno*, whose treatment of 77–78 is at odds with Penner and Rowe's, does not engage or cite Penner and Rowe's paper. (Note that Anagnostopoulos [2003] has soundly refuted Penner and Rowe's treatment of the *Meno* passage.)

12. Weiss 1992, 299–300. Consider Weiss's following remark: “Here I differ with McTighe 1984, 255, who believes that the elenchus in which Polus serves as Socrates' interlocutor is *ad hominem* in the destructive sense, ‘destructive not (necessarily) of any false beliefs the interlocutor may have concerning the matters under discussion but rather of the false belief he has *about himself*—that he is wise and hence in no need to engage in further investigation” (n. 3).

13. *Ibid.*, 300.

14. Segvic 2000, 40–45.

15. I use this adjective throughout the article to characterize propositions or arguments intended by their author to be true or sound—whether or not they are true or sound. Thus, an argument may be alethic, but unsound.

16. Segvic 2000, 11. “In claiming [in *Gorgias*] that orators and tyrants do not do what they want to do, Socrates is inviting us to think of *wanting* as a volitional state that is in some ways like perceiving. I do not perceive an object if I have some images; I perceive it only if my sensory impressions derive from the object itself in the right way. Socratic volition is likewise a receptivity of the soul to certain evaluative properties of the object of volition, the properties Socrates designates by the term ‘good.’ However, wanting is not sheer receptivity; it is mediated by a correct conception of desire as the good or right thing to do” (*ibid.*, 10).

Furthermore, (D) is not trivially true just because Socrates stipulatively defines desire in an idiosyncratic way. Socrates' claim is "meant to express a truth about the underlying structure of human motivation."¹⁷ "Socrates seems to propose his special notion of wanting . . . not as a notion we already have at work in our language, but rather as a notion that we occasionally grope for, and a notion that we need. We need it because it enables us to express something that is of relevance to all the willing, wishing, and desiring that we ordinarily do and ordinarily speak of."¹⁸

Given the great disparity between the *ad hominem* positions of McTighe and Weiss, on the one hand, and the alethic accounts of Penner and Segvic, on the other, as well as the disparities among the proponents of the *ad hominem* and alethic accounts themselves, a re-examination of the *Gorgias* argument is appropriate.

I argue that the *Gorgias* argument is neither wholly alethic nor *ad hominem*. Between these two alternatives I steer a middle course, which I call "dialectical"; and so I propose to call the *Gorgias* argument "dialectical." By a dialectical argument, I mean an argument that employs premises to at least some of which the presenter of those premises is not committed, but which the presenter uses as expedients. (D) is one such expedient premise. To this extent I am sympathetic to McTighe's rejection of Socrates' expression of (D) as evidence of Plato's philosophical psychology. I emphasize, however, that such premises are not necessarily *ad hominem*; that is, they are not necessarily premises to which the interlocutor *per se* commits. Rather, as in the case of (D), they may represent conventional beliefs and so may be premises to which the average interlocutor would commit. In this respect, dialectical argumentation differs from *ad hominem* argumentation. Indeed, I suggest that a number of arguments in Plato's early dialogues contain premises of this kind. Furthermore, a dialectical argument is not intended simply to refute the interlocutor, as, for instance, an eristic argument is. The intention of the presenter is similar to that in an alethic argument, to pursue the truth. And the use of dialectical premises does not seriously jeopardize the alethic intention behind the argument, for the presenter of the argument has purely alethic means to arrive at a similar or identical conclusion. Those alethic means are, however, more elaborate; and thus, the dialectical argument is expedient. As such, the conclusions from dialectical arguments should be understood by the reader of the dialogue as tentative precisely insofar as they depend upon alethic arguments to supplant the dialectical premises.

Plato's early dialogues dramatize investigations of philosophical questions to a greater extent than they present the results of investigations. The argumentation of inquiry differs from the argumentation of demonstration. It is, therefore, appropriate that dialectical argumentation in particular should play a prominent role in the early dialogues. More generally, the case for the

17. *Ibid.*, 13.

18. *Ibid.*, 19. Note also that both Penner's and Segvic's positions, contra McTighe's and Weiss's, preserve the entailment between the principle that everyone desires the good and the principle that no one does wrong willingly.

existence and importance of dialectical argumentation clarifies one aspect of the relation between the dramatic and argumentative dimensions of the texts.

Overview of the Argument

Commentators have consistently and rightly recognized that the argument at *Gorgias* 466e4–468e5 has two basic movements: 466a4–467a10 and 467c5–468e5.¹⁹ Accordingly, I will speak of the “first” and “second” movements of the argument. It will also be convenient to speak of the “transitional section” between the two movements at 467b1–c4 and the “introductory section” of the first movement at 466a4–b5. In short, the basic structure of the argument is:

Introductory section (of the first movement):	466a4–b5
First movement:	465b6–467a10
Transitional section:	467b1–c4
Second movement:	467c5–468e5

Interpretation of the argument as a whole requires consideration of its position, and so function, within the larger dialogue. The argument is the first of two that Socrates and Polus develop in the Polus episode of the dialogue. The second of the two arguments concerns whether it is better to suffer harm than to do it, and that argument develops out of the conclusion to the first argument. The first argument itself develops out of Socrates’ account of rhetoric as a type of flattery.

In this critique of rhetoric, Socrates claims that rhetoric is not a craft (τέχνη). Accordingly, competence in rhetoric does not require knowledge, and so orators lack intelligence. Socrates distinguishes two aspects of craft knowledge: knowledge of φύσις and knowledge of αἰτία. These I will call “identity” and “causal” knowledge respectively. For example, in the case of medicine, whose subject matter is bodily health, identity knowledge is knowledge of what bodily health is, and causal knowledge is knowledge of how to produce bodily health.

Socrates’ critique of rhetoric as a kind of flattery is twofold. Socrates claims that orators are concerned with the production of pleasure. Thus, it would seem that, properly, rhetoric would be a craft of pleasure. However, rhetoric is not technical as such at all. Rather, Socrates describes rhetoric as a kind of competence (ἐμπειρία) that, again, does not operate according to principles of knowledge. We might say that rhetoric operates rather intuitively. But rhetoric is defective not merely because it is nontechnical in this sense; it also involves a misconception of goodness. As Socrates says, pleasure is a semblance (εἶδολον) of goodness, and thus rhetoric—like cookery, fashion, and sophistry, which are also concerned with the production

19. This division occurs as early as Olympiodorus’ commentary.

of pleasure—is a false and debased form of a correlatively true craft. Specifically, rhetoric is a debased form of the craft of justice, statesmanship.

Socrates' first and second arguments with Polus include criticisms of rhetoric *qua* nontechnical competence that focus on orators' lack of intelligence and, specifically, lack of causal knowledge and identity knowledge respectively. In short, then, this paper defends an interpretation of *Gorgias* 466a4–468e5 as an argument that orators lack causal knowledge.²⁰

I. INTRODUCTORY SECTION: THE VALUE OF RHETORIC (466a4–b5)

Gorgias 466a4–b5 serves as preamble to the first movement of the argument. This introductory section concerns the value of rhetoric. Polus naturally believes that effective orators are of great value, whereas Socrates regards orators as being of little value. Socrates' and Polus' disagreement over the value of rhetoric follows from Socrates' account of rhetoric as a type of flattery. At the conclusion of Socrates' account, Polus summarizes Socrates' point as:

(i1₁) Rhetoric is flattery.²¹

Socrates criticizes Polus for characterizing his point as such, and Socrates emphasizes that he is committed to:

(i1₂) Rhetoric is a type of flattery.²²

This exchange is one among several Plato composes in the dialogue in order to characterize Polus as an inadequately subtle thinker and in particular to contrast Polus' rhetorical and dialectical abilities. Prior to his response to Socrates' account of rhetoric as a type of flattery, Polus had been silent for thirteen Stephanus pages of dialogue. Prior to that, he had, on Gorgias' behalf, offered to answer Socrates' questions concerning rhetoric. In response to Socrates' question regarding the identity of Gorgias' craft (τέχνη), Polus responds that it is the finest of the crafts (*Grg.* 448c4–9). Socrates explains that the answer is unsatisfactory because he had asked not *what sort of thing* (ποία τις) Gorgias' craft is, but *what* (τίς) it is (448e6–7). Socrates also says: “It is clear from what he has said that Polus has had more training in what is called ‘rhetoric’ than dialectic” (448d8–10).

Both earlier and here in the introductory section, then, Polus' statements confuse identification and predication. Accordingly, Plato draws attention to the distinction between dialectical (that is, philosophical) discourse's con-

20. As such, my basic thesis resembles one proposed, although not substantially defended, by Hall 1971, 206: “The relevance of this passage to Socrates' claim that the rhetoricians ‘do nothing that they wish’ although they do whatever ‘they think best’, refers to a wrongness in the choice of means to a desired end rather than in the selection of ends. Socrates condemns the unintelligent and, hence, wrong choice of means to an end. The ends which the rhetorician may desire are conventional goods. Yet, his profession of rhetoric makes him powerless to choose intelligently the appropriate means to attain these goods.”

21. Τί οὖν φης; κολακεία δοκεῖ σοι εἶναι ἡ ῥητορικὴ; (*Grg.* 466a4–5).

22. Κολακείας μὲν οὖν ἔγωγε εἶπον μόνιον (*Grg.* 466a6).

cern with logic and reasoning and rhetorical discourse’s lack of concern with logic and reasoning and Socrates’ and Polus’ relative logical and rational capabilities.

Granted, then, that, as Socrates believes, rhetoric is a type of flattery, it follows that Socrates believes that:

(i1₃) Orators are flatterers.

However, both Socrates and Polus assume that:

(i2) Flattery is a bad thing—that is, a thing of low value.

Consequently, (i1₃) and (i2) imply that:

(i3) Orators are of low value.

Although Socrates does not explicitly state (i3), Polus correctly takes him to be committed to it. Polus responds by questioning whether good (ἀγαθοί) orators are generally considered to be flatterers and so worthless.²³ Polus means by the phrase “good orators” *orators who are effective at persuading the public*.²⁴ Accordingly, Polus’ response to (i3) implies that:

(i4₁) The public does not consider effective orators to be flatterers.

And so:

(i4₂) Popular esteem of effective orators is indicative of their true value.

A natural response to (i4_{1–2}) would be that the public’s evaluation of “good” orators does not reflect the true value of these orators. In other words, popular judgment is an unsatisfactory standard of evaluation. Indeed, I suggest that this is the force of Socrates’ response, although Socrates does not express himself literally as such. Socrates claims that:

(i4₃) Effective orators are not esteemed [νομίζεσθαι] at all.²⁵

I take Socrates here to mean that the public does not consider effective orators to be good insofar as the public, like the orators themselves, has a mistaken understanding of goodness.

23. Ἄρ’ οὖν δοκοῦσί σοι ὡς κόλακες ἐν ταῖς πόλεσι φαῦλοι νομίζεσθαι οἱ ἀγαθοὶ ῥήτορες; (*Grg.* 466a9–10).

24. It might be objected that Socrates himself does not interpret the phrase in this way. Rather, when Socrates denies that such orators are “considered” by the public, this may be taken to mean that the public fails to recognize the few, true, good orators. But this is a correct interpretation, for Socrates proceeds to claim that such orators lack power insofar as power is a good thing for one who has it. In that case, it is clear that the orators who lack power in this sense are not the few, true, good orators.

25. Οὐδὲ νομίζεσθαι ἔμοιγε δοκοῦσιν (*Grg.* 466b3). Compare Lamb’s translation in the Loeb edition: “they are not considered at all” and Zeyl’s translation in Cooper’s edition: “I don’t think they’re held in any regard at all.” I emphasize that the subject of δοκοῦσιν cannot be orators in general; it must be the same subject as in *Grg.* 466a9–10 (see n. 23 above).

In response to (i4₃) Polus understandably argues that:

- (i5) Effective orators are esteemed by the public since they have the greatest power of all citizens in their cities.

In other words, Polus makes explicit the point in (i4₂): the great power that effective orators possess reflects the high esteem in which they are held.

(i5) reveals the principal grounds of Polus' personal admiration of rhetoric. Polus values rhetoric insofar as rhetoric endows its possessor with power, precisely power over one's fellow citizens. This in part also explains Polus' subsequent assimilation of orators to despots.

Plato is, of course, aware that rhetoric is a powerful force within the city-state and that wealthy and ambitious Athenian youths study rhetoric precisely as a means to political power. For example, in *Protagoras*, Protagoras claims to be able to teach Hippocrates how to manage the affairs of his estate and how to become most powerful in speech and action regarding the affairs of the city (318e–319a).

As Plato sees it, the basic problem with rhetoric is that although it can widely influence belief, it does not *per se* engender valuable belief and so valuable social conditions. So the basic problem with Polus, *qua* advocate of rhetoric, is that he believes that the ability to widely influence belief *per se* is a good thing and thus that this power of rhetoric is a good thing. Accordingly, the following argument focuses on the power of rhetoric.

2. FIRST MOVEMENT: THE POWER OF RHETORIC (466b6–467a10)

Premise (i5) from the introductory section implies that:

- (f1₁) Effective orators have the greatest power in their cities.

Socrates denies (f1₁). He claims that orators do not have power in their cities insofar as power is a good (*ἀγαθόν*) thing for one who has it.²⁶ It would seem, then, that Socrates is committing himself to:

- (f2₁) Power is a good thing for one who has it.

In view of this, some commentators claim that Socrates is employing (f2₁) in a deliberately fallacious manner.²⁷ Specifically, it is noted that power is not always a good thing for one who has it and that, elsewhere

26. Οὐκ [οἱ ῥήτορες οὐ μέγιστον δύνανται ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν], εἰ τὸ δύνασθαι γε λέγεις ἀγαθόν τι εἶναι τῷ δυναμένῳ (*Grg.* 466b6–7).

27. For example, Irwin (1979, 137): “The reply is stated in deliberately paradoxical terms—and, we will find, overstated.” And Weiss (1992, 302): “Socrates surely distorts the ordinary sense of power: being powerful is not commonly regarded—and not ordinarily regarded even by Socrates—as anything more than the ability to do whatever one pleases.” Compare McTighe (1984, 219–20), and also Penner (1991, 154–55), who argues that if one interprets Socrates' introduction of (f2₁) as simply redefining the argument's key term, then the argument is “a cheat.” Penner then counters this interpretation by arguing that Socrates is not simply redefining “power.”

among the early dialogues, Socrates himself does not treat power as such. For instance, in *Hippias Major*, Socrates suggests a definition of fineness as power; however, he subsequently rejects this definition on the grounds that power is not always fine (295e5–296d7; cf. *Euthd.* 278e–281e).

This response misconstrues the role of (f2₁) in Socrates' and Polus' exchange. Neither Socrates nor Polus commits to (f2₁) as a principle about the identity of power *simpliciter*. By this I mean that (f2₁) is not introduced as answering to a question such as “Is power necessarily a good thing for one who has it?” Rather, Socrates introduces (f2₁) in order to clarify the nature of Polus' commitment to (f1₁). Consider the exchange (*Grg.* 466b4–5):

[Pol:] Do [effective orators] not have the greatest power in their cities? [Soc:] No—not if *you* mean by “having power” having something good for one who is powerful.
[Pol:] But of course that is what *I* mean.²⁸

Socrates would not, I believe, deny the obvious, that certain orators have power in the sense that they effect persuasion widely. But Socrates recognizes that in claiming (f1₁) Polus also intends to convey that this persuasive competence is valuable. So Socrates correctly interprets Polus' claim (f1₁) to imply not merely that orators have the ability to effect persuasion among the citizenry, but that this particular competence is a good thing for them to have. And, as we see, Polus strongly assents to this interpretation of his claim.

There is, indeed, a legitimate sense in which the word “power” is used to imply something good for one who has it. In a number of contexts, words such as “strength,” “capability,” “power,” and their adjectival cognates have such positive implications. Compare the following instances from English: “He is a capable person”; “she has a powerful mind”; “the boy has a strong sense of self.” And contrast these with their opposites: “He is a weak person, has a weak mind or sense of self.” When Polus claims that orators have great power in their cities, he means power in this sense. (f2₁) should, then, be understood as:

(f2₂) Power of the sort that effective orators possess is a good thing for its possessor.

Thus, Socrates' interpretation of Polus' commitment to (f1₁) as implying (f2₂) is legitimate.²⁹ In sum, the presence of (f2₂) in the exchange should not be construed as implying that both men believe that anything that is correctly called a “power” is good for its possessor. Rather, we should interpret (f2₂) as clarifying Polus' commitment to (f1₁). Accordingly, Polus' thesis in the first movement of the argument should be understood as:

28. ΠΩΛ. . . οὐ μέγιστον δύνανται ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν; for the remainder of the citation, see n. 26. All translations are mine.

29. Note also that in turning the discussion to the question of whether effective orators have power, the question of whether effective orators are “considered” by the public is, at least ostensibly, suspended. Socrates neither clarifies what he means by “considered,” nor does Polus further pursue Socrates' objection (i4₃). On the other hand, the question of rhetoric's power and its value proceeds to engage the same issues that the question of whether effective orators are considered would have.

(f1₂) Effective orators have the greatest power in their cities, where by “power” is meant something that is good for its possessor.

In response to (f1₂), Socrates claims that:

(f1₃) [Effective] orators have the least power (*qua* something good for its possessor) in their cities.³⁰

Note that although in Socrates’ expression of (f1₃), the subject is οἱ ῥήτορες (“the orators”), Socrates is specifically referring to that subset of orators whom Polus described as ἀγαθοί. This follows from the fact that the subject of the preceding exchange has consistently been that effective subset of orators, not orators in general; but it also follows from Socrates’ claim that these orators have least power in their cities.

Broadly speaking, Socrates’ commitment to (f1₃) is to be explained in terms of his conception of rhetoric’s relation to pleasure. In his description of rhetoric preceding the introductory section, Socrates characterizes rhetoric as a competence “of producing a sort of gratification and pleasure.”³¹ In other words, rhetoric effects persuasion by pleasing its audience. At the same time, rhetoric *per se* does not include knowledge of goodness, and so the orator as such does not attempt to achieve or promote goodness. Rather, orators share with the public at large a fundamental motivation toward pleasure and gratification. Thus, orators effect persuasion through gratification *and do so for the sake of self-gratification*. Moreover, pleasure is a semblance (εἶδωλον) of goodness.³² And since the “best” orators are most effective at gratifying the public and themselves, the pleasure they attain comes at the expense of the attainment of goodness; as such they attain least of what is good for themselves. Consequently, they have the least power in their cities.

This account of Socrates’ commitment to (f1₃) is not explicit as such in the first movement of the argument. However, it is consistent with Socrates’ description of rhetoric preceding the argument and, as we will see, with his commitments in the second movement.

Polus objects to (f1₃) that:

(f3) [Effective orators have the greatest power (*qua* something good for its possessor) in their cities since,] like despots, they execute anyone they desire and confiscate property and exile from their cities whom-ever they think fit.³³

Polus mentions these acts precisely because he regards them as emblematic of great power. At the same time, I see no reason to think that Polus is a

30. Ἐλάχιστον τοίνυν μοι δοκοῦσι τῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει δύνασθαι οἱ ῥήτορες (*Grg.* 466b9–10).

31. Χάριτός τινος καὶ ἡδονῆς ἀπεργασίας (*Grg.* 462c7).

32. Compare Socrates’ claim: Τὸ τοιοῦτον λέγω καὶ ἐν σώματι εἶναι καὶ ἐν ψυχῇ ὃ ποιεῖ μὲν δοκεῖν εὖ ἔχειν τὸ σῶμα καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν, ἔχει δὲ οὐδὲν μᾶλλον (*Grg.* 464a7–b1).

33. οὐχ, ὡσπερ οἱ τύραννοι, ἀποκτινύσασί τε ὃν ἂν βούλωνται, καὶ ἀφαιροῦνται χρήματα καὶ ἐκβάλλουσιν ἐκ τῶν πόλεων ὃν ἂν δοκῇ αὐτοῖς; (*Grg.* 466b11–c2). Note that Socrates uses the expression δοκεῖ αὐτῷ equivalently to δοκεῖ αὐτῷ βέλτιστα throughout the argument.

sadist, that he is actually attracted to the possibility of doing these sorts of things. Rather, he is attracted to the power that such persons would have.³⁴ Let us call this “despotic power.”

Polus’ commitment to (f3) is consistent with his commitment to (f1₂). Polus surely believes that despotic power is a good thing for its possessor. And no doubt, the reason for this belief is, as he thinks, that despotic power enables one to do whatever one desires. Indeed, in the ensuing discussion it becomes evident that Polus is committed to this conventional conception of power:

(f4₁) Power (*qua* something good for its possessor) is the ability to do what one desires.

At the same time, as (f3) indicates, Polus is also committed to:

(f5) Doing what one desires is equivalent to doing what one thinks best.

And so Polus is also committed to:

(f4₂) Power (*qua* something good for its possessor) is the ability to do what one thinks best.

Socrates denies the equivalence in (f5), and, thus, although he too commits to (f4₁), Socrates does not commit to (f4₂). In the first movement, Socrates draws attention to the distinction between doing what one desires and doing what one thinks best (*Grg.* 466c–e4); however, the argument here does not crucially depend upon this distinction. Rather, the first movement adumbrates the distinction, which then becomes crucial in the second movement.

Neither (f4₁) nor (f5), then, figures as a premise in the first movement of the argument. Instead, Socrates focuses on (f4₂) and argues as follows. A person may do what he thinks best, yet without intelligence. However:

(f6) Doing what one thinks best, without intelligence, is not good for oneself.³⁵

Therefore, given (f2₂):

(f7) Exercising power (*qua* something good for its possessor) is not equivalent to doing what one thinks best.³⁶

34. Compare Weiss (1992, 305–6): “Socrates’ first step, therefore, in dealing with Polus must be to confront and remove his enthusiasm for the kind of power that enables one to indulge in inflicting harm upon whomever one wishes.”

35. Ἀγαθὸν οὖν οἶε εἶναι ἕαν τις ποιῇ ταῦτα ἃ ἂν δοκῇ αὐτῷ βέλτιστα εἶναι νοῦν μὴ ἔχων; (*Grg.* 466e9–10).

36. καὶ τοῦτο [i.e., τὸ ταῦτα ἃ ἂν δοκῇ αὐτῷ βέλτιστα εἶναι νοῦν μὴ ἔχοντι ποιεῖν] καλεῖς σὺ μέγα δύνασθαι; (*Grg.* 466e10–11).

Moreover, given (i1₂)—that rhetoric is a type of flattery and not a craft—it follows that:

(f8₁) Orators lack intelligence.³⁷

And therefore:

(f9) Orators lack power (*qua* something good for its possessor).³⁸

Summary of First Movement

In sum, the first movement employs the following central premises to conclude against (f1₂) that (f9) orators lack power *qua* something good for its possessor:

(f6) Doing what one thinks best, but without intelligence, is not good for oneself.

(f7) Exercising power *qua* something good for its possessor is not equivalent to doing what one thinks best.

(f8₁) Orators lack intelligence.

All three premises are alethic. The argument is also valid. I emphasize, moreover, that (f2₁) is not a premise of the argument. As I have shown, Socrates introduces (f2₁) to clarify Polus' initial thesis (f1₁). Socrates' introduction of (f2₁), properly interpreted as (f2₂), then, serves to clarify (f1₁) as (f1₂), which is Polus' thesis, the thesis that Socrates' argument refutes.

3. TRANSITIONAL SECTION (467b1–c4)

The transitional section partially functions to emphasize the unconventionality of Socrates' distinction between doing what one thinks best and doing what one desires. In this process, the transitional section orients the reader to the second movement in a manner similar to that in which the introductory section orients the reader to the first movement. Consider Polus' response to Socrates' distinction between doing what one thinks best and doing what one desires and Socrates' reply (*Grg.* 467b10–c2):

[Pol:] You are saying appalling and outrageous things, Socrates! [Soc:] Don't abuse me, peerless Polus—to address you in your own style. But if you are able to question me, show me that I am deceived; and if not, answer yourself.³⁹

37. Οὐκοῦν ἀποδείξεις τοὺς ῥήτορας νοῦν ἔχοντας καὶ τέχνην τὴν ῥητορικὴν ἀλλὰ μὴ κολακείαν, ἐμὲ ἐξελέγξας; (*Grg.* 466e13–467a1).

38. εἰ δέ με εἰσεις ἀνέλεγκτον, οἱ ῥήτορες οἱ ποιοῦντες ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἃ δοκεῖ αὐτοῖς καὶ οἱ τύραννοι οὐδὲν ἀγαθὸν τοῦτο κεκτήσονται, εἰ δὴ δύναμίς ἐστιν, ὡς σὺ φῆς, ἀγαθόν, τὸ δὲ ποιεῖν ἄνευ νοῦ ἃ δοκεῖ καὶ σὺ ὁμολογεῖς κακὸν εἶναι (*Grg.* 467a1–5).

39. ΠΩΛ. Σχέτλιά γε λέγεις καὶ ὑπερφυῖ, ὦ Σώκратες, ΣΩ. Μὴ κατηγορεῖ, ὦ λῶστε Πῶλε, ἵνα προσείπω σε κατὰ σέ· ἀλλ' εἰ μὲν ἔχεις ἐμὲ ἐρωτᾶν, ἐπίδειξον ὅτι ψεύδομαι, εἰ δὲ μὴ, αὐτὸς ἀποκρίνου.

As in the introductory section, Plato again draws attention to the distinction between the characters of philosophical discourse and rhetoric. This exchange may be profitably compared with a response Socrates makes to Polus in the second argument of the Polus episode (*Grg.* 473e2–3): “What is this? Are you laughing, Polus? Is this another form of refutation: when someone says something, to laugh at it and not to examine it?” Likewise, here in the transitional section of the first argument, Socrates is challenging Polus to countenance in a logical argument a claim that intuitively strikes Polus as incredible. Thus, Socrates’ ability to develop, by means of logical argumentation, a compelling case for the view that doing what one thinks best is not equivalent to doing what one desires in principle indicates the value of philosophical discourse. Precisely, philosophical discourse challenges one to rationally justify one’s beliefs and as such has the potential to reveal the irrationality of certain of one’s beliefs.

4. SECOND MOVEMENT: DOING WHAT ONE DESIRES (467c5–468e5)

The first movement contains the following point of vagueness. It is argued that doing what one thinks best is not a good thing when one lacks intelligence and that orators lack intelligence because rhetoric is not a craft. This last claim, we have seen, emerges from Socrates’ account of rhetoric in the movement of the dialogue before the introductory section (*Grg.* 465a2–5): “I claim that [rhetoric] is not a craft (τέχνη), but a competence (ἐμπειρία), for it does not involve an account (λόγος) of the things it furnishes (προσφέρει), namely of the nature (φύσις) of such things; and consequently, it cannot explain the cause (αἰτία) of these things.”

Insofar as rhetoric is concerned with pleasure, this seems to imply that:

(f8₂) Orators lack knowledge of the nature of pleasure (identity knowledge) and of the means to produce pleasure (causal knowledge).

But given (f2₂) and the fact that Socrates himself regards pleasure and goodness as nonidentical, it would rather seem that, in asserting (f8₁), Socrates understands:

(f8₃) Orators lack knowledge of the identity of goodness and of the means to produce goodness.⁴⁰

Accordingly, Socrates would understand the argument also to contain the following tacit assumption:

(f10) Orators, like despots, regard pleasure as identical to goodness.

In other words, orators lack intelligence not because rhetoric is not a craft of pleasure, but because rhetoric is not a craft of goodness.

40. Socrates’ words at 467a1–5 (cited in n. 38) demonstrate this.

Of course, all this has required reading into the argument Socratic beliefs that Socrates himself does not deploy in the argument. Again, in the first movement, it remains vague in what sense orators lack intelligence. In the second movement, moreover, Socrates does not proceed to elucidate orators' lack of intelligence as such. To the extent that orators' lack of intelligence is elucidated in the second movement, the focus is on causal knowledge rather than identity knowledge, that is, knowledge of means to ends, rather than knowledge of ends. Thus, in the second movement, Socrates' conclusion that one may do what one thinks best, but not do what one desires means that one may act according to a belief about how one's action is conducive to a desired end without thereby achieving the object of one's desire. This is simply because one may be mistaken about the relation between the means and the end. Thus, Socrates argues (*Grg.* 468d1–6):

[Soc:] Then . . . if one man kills or banishes from a city another man or confiscates his property . . . believing that it is better for himself, yet it is worse, then that man, I take it, does what seems best to him—correct? [Pol:] Yes. [Soc:] Then, is it also the case that he does what he desires if these things are in fact bad?⁴¹

Note, furthermore, the following points about the second movement. First, the second movement is not explicitly developed as an argument against orators' lack of causal knowledge and *a fortiori* not as an argument against orators' lack of intelligence on the grounds that because rhetoric is not a craft orators lack the pertinent causal knowledge. The second movement is, explicitly, an argument for the nonequivalence of doing what one thinks best and doing what one desires. In relation to the first movement, as well as to the second argument of the *Polus* episode, the second movement may be read as an oblique argument against orators' lack of causal knowledge. Second, to the extent that the second movement may be read as such, since it does not concern itself with identity knowledge, that is, knowledge of ends, the second movement proceeds by assuming as ends a conventional list of goods: wisdom, health, wealth, and the like. Since Socrates does not regard all the items on this list as goods on a par with wisdom, the argument of the second movement is, to that extent, dialectical.

Let us now turn to see how the argument unfolds.

Terminal versus Instrumental Desire in Instrumental Action

Socrates asks *Polus* to choose between the following disjuncts (*Grg.* 467c5–7): “. . . (1) do people desire that which they do on each occasion [ἐκάστοτε], or (2) do people desire that for the sake of which they do what they do?”⁴² Socrates subsequently argues for and *Polus* agrees to (2).

McTighe has interpreted (2) as claiming: “All action is such that if a person does something, he desires only that for the sake of which he acts, not the

41. ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν . . . εἴ τις ἀποκτείνει τινὰ ἢ ἐκβάλλει ἐκ πόλεως ἢ ἀφαιρεῖται χρήματα . . . οἰόμενος ἄμεινον εἶναι αὐτῷ τυγχάνει δὲ ὄν κάκιον, οὗτος δὴπου ποιεῖ ἃ δοκεῖ αὐτῷ· ἢ γάρ; ΠΩΛ. Ναί. ΣΩ. Ἄρ' οὖν καὶ ἃ βούλεται εἶπερ τυγχάνει ταῦτα κακὰ ὄντα;

42. Πότερον οὖν σοὶ δοκοῦσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι τοῦτο βούλεσθαι ὃ ἂν πράττωσιν ἐκάστοτε ἢ ἐκεῖνο ὃ ἔνεκα πράττουσι τοῦθ' ὃ πράττουσιν;

action itself.”⁴³ And McTighe argues that this interpretation involves Socrates in a number of difficulties. Let us, then, clarify Socrates’ intention in (2).

After introducing the disjunction of (1) and (2), Socrates clarifies himself through two examples: taking bitter medicine for the sake of health and suffering danger on a merchant ship for the sake of profit. Polus agrees that in these cases the agent desires health, as opposed to medicine, and profit, as opposed to the sea journey. Consequently, Socrates states and Polus agrees to the following principle:

(s1₁) When a man performs an action for the sake of some object, he desires the object, not the action.⁴⁴

I emphasize that in (s1₁) Socrates speaks of occasions when a man performs an action for the sake of some object. Thus, although it is not explicit in the original disjunction, Socrates is not making an argument about any action whatsoever. Rather, he is making an argument about instrumental action. The adverb *ἐκάστοτε* in disjunct (1) must, then, be interpreted to mean: people desire that which they do *whenever they act* for the sake of something, rather than simply whenever they act.

Granted this, Socrates has been accused of inconsistency on the grounds that (s1₁) contradicts the following proposition to which Socrates subsequently commits:

(s1₂) When a man performs an action for the sake of some object, he desires the action insofar as the action conduces to the desired object.⁴⁵

So, it is alleged that Socrates initially denies that instrumental action is desired, but subsequently admits that it can be.

I suggest that in view of (s1₂), it is simply uncharitable to interpret Socrates as committed to (s1₁) such that Socrates contradicts himself in the space of what is in fact one Stephanus page. The following is a more reasonable explanation of the relation between (s1₁) and (s1₂). In the course of the second movement, Socrates is clarifying the motivational structure in instrumental action.⁴⁶ He first clarifies that when action is undertaken for the sake of some object, that action is not desired *per se*; in other words, that action is not terminally desired.

Accordingly, Socrates initially introduces (s1₁) in order to highlight the distinction between means and ends in the interest of illuminating the deeper motivational structure operative in instrumental action. As such, the examples of taking medicine and risking one’s life at sea are indeed loaded,

43. McTighe 1984, 203.

44. ΣΩ. ἔάν τις τι πράττη ἕνεκά του, οὐ τοῦτο βούλεται ὁ πράττει, ἀλλ’ ἐκεῖνο οὗ ἕνεκα πράττει; ΠΩΛ. Ναί (Grg. 467d6–e1).

45. Οὐκ ἄρα σφάττειν βουλόμεθα οὐδ’ ἐκβάλλειν ἐκ τῶν πόλεων οὐδὲ χρήματα ἀφαιρεῖσθαι ἀπλῶς οὕτως, ἀλλ’ ἐὰν μὲν ὀφέλιμα ἦ ταῦτα, βουλόμεθα πράττειν αὐτά, βλαβερὰ δὲ ὄντα οὐ βουλόμεθα (Grg. 468c2–5). For example, McTighe claims that one of three fallacies in the argument of the second movement is that Socrates initially claims that we do not desire instrumental actions (at Grg. 467c5–e1), but subsequently that we do desire the action insofar as it is beneficial (at Grg. 468c2–8).

46. By “instrumental action” I mean action undertaken for the sake of some end.

but not—as has been suggested—in a cunning effort to compel upon Polus a fallacious belief. Rather, the stark contrast between taking bitter medicine or suffering danger at sea and recovering one's health or making a profit is particularly useful in conveying or at least developing these points. In short, (s1₁) is an imprecise formulation, but, like the examples on the basis of which it is inferred, it is dialectically expedient. The following more precise proposition is the one to which Socrates is actually committed:

(s1₃) When a man performs an action for the sake of some object, he terminally desires the object, not the action.⁴⁷

Accordingly, in the course of the second movement, Socrates develops the claim that:

(s1₄) When a man performs an action for the sake of some object, he (terminally) desires the object, and he desires the action insofar as it conduces to the object; in other words, he (instrumentally, but not terminally) desires the action.⁴⁸

In developing (s1₄) Socrates is, as I have said, illuminating the nature of desiderative motivation⁴⁹ in instrumental action. In doing so, he scrutinizes the accuracy of conventional desiderative reports. Polus believes that orators or despots may desire to execute, banish, or steal from citizens, and, as we have seen, he regards the ability to execute such desires as indicative of a valuable power. In developing (s1₄) Socrates is claiming that orators and despots do not terminally desire these actions (*Grg.* 468c2–4):⁵⁰ “Then we do not desire to execute or exile people from cities or confiscate their property simply so [ἀπλῶς οὕτως], but if these things are beneficial [in other words, if these things conduce to something good], then we desire to do them.”⁵¹ Accordingly, it is questionable what ends orators and despots do terminally desire and whether such actions in fact are conducive to those ends.⁵²

47. The most explicit evidence for this is at *Grg.* 468c2–4, which is cited immediately below.

48. Thus, for instance, Irwin (1979, 14) is wrong to say that “[Socrates] is wrong to infer that therefore we don't really want *x* if *x* is a means to some further end.”

49. Here and throughout I assume that desire is one type of motivation. There is, of course, a trivial sense in which everything that one does is desired. This has been called “formal desire.” But there is also a more robust sense of desire. For example, a person forced to perform a task under threat of grievous bodily harm may choose to perform that task, but, in some important sense, not desire to do it. And yet one who performs the task will have some motivation to do so. Of course, there are cases where one's motivation to do *a* is that one desires to do *a*. So motivation seems to be a superordinate category. One way that the distinction between motivation and desire has been clarified is by taking motivation, but not desire, to be conceptually tied to action. For example, one might desire that the weather be nice in Bermuda when one arrives there. Another way the distinction has been clarified is by distinguishing desires and aversions as distinct species of motivation. In other words, it is one thing to pursue an object and another to avoid an object.

50. Weiss (1992, 305–6) argues for a similar point.

51. Οὐκ ἄρα σφάττειν βουλόμεθα οὐδ' ἐκβάλλειν ἐκ τῶν πόλεων οὐδὲ χρήματα ἀφαιρεῖσθαι ἀπλῶς οὕτως, ἀλλ' ἐὰν μὲν ὠφέλιμα ἢ ταῦτα, βουλόμεθα πράττειν αὐτά.

52. Note, then, that the objection that some action is terminally desired is beside the point. Socrates' argument concerns action instrumentally desired. And he feels entitled to argue as such since he suspects that Polus' despot's actions are not undertaken for their own sake; and he is correct.

The Objects of Terminal Desire

Granted that in introducing (s1₁) Socrates' intention is to develop (s1₄), Socrates now proceeds to clarify the identity of desired ends, in other words, the objects of terminal desire.⁵³ He begins by eliciting Polus' assent to the following trichotomy:

(s2) Everything is good, bad, or neither-good-nor-bad (hereafter, intermediate).⁵⁴

Next, Socrates and Polus agree to the following conventional list of good things and bad things:

(s3₁) Wisdom, health, wealth, and such things are good.

(s3₂) Ignorance, illness, poverty, and such things are bad.⁵⁵

Socrates defines, and Polus agrees to a definition of, intermediate things as actions or objects that are performed or used to obtain good things or bad things (*Grg.* 467e6–468a4):

[Soc:] And do you agree that the following are neither-good-nor-bad: things that sometimes partake of the good, sometimes of the bad, and sometimes of neither, such as sitting, walking, running, and sailing, and also such things as stones, sticks, and other such things . . . [Pol:] Yes.⁵⁶

According to this trichotomy, actions that are undertaken for the sake of some good fall into the category of the intermediate. And Socrates and Polus agree that:

(s4) People do intermediate things (or use intermediate objects)⁵⁷ for the sake of good things.⁵⁸

Subsequently, Socrates and Polus agree as follows (*Grg.* 468c5–8): “For we desire good things, as you yourself admit; we do not desire neither-good-nor-bad things, nor do we desire bad things. Right? . . . [Pol.] True.”⁵⁹ In this passage, Socrates and Polus commit to three propositions:

53. Throughout this section and following, I prefer the phrases “instrumental desire” and “terminal desire” to “extrinsic desire” and “intrinsic desire.”

54. ΣΩ. Ἄρ' οὖν ἔστιν τι τῶν ὄντων ὃ οὐχὶ ἤτοι ἀγαθὸν γ' ἔστιν ἢ κακὸν ἢ μεταξὺ τούτων οὔτε ἀγαθὸν οὔτε κακόν; ΠΩΛ. Πολλὴ ἀνάγκη, ὦ Σώκράτης (*Grg.* 467e1–4).

55. ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν λέγεις εἶναι ἀγαθὸν μὲν σοφίαν τε καὶ ὑγίειαν καὶ πλοῦτον καὶ ἄλλα τὰ τοιαῦτα, κακὰ δὲ τὰναντία τούτων; ΠΩΛ. Ἔγωγε (*Grg.* 467e4–6).

56. ΣΩ. Τὰ δὲ μήτε ἀγαθὰ μήτε κακὰ ἄρα τοιάδε λέγεις ἃ ἐνίοτε μὲν μετέχει τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἐνίοτε δὲ τοῦ κακοῦ, ἐνίοτε δὲ οὐδετέρου, οἷον καθῆσθαι καὶ βαδίζειν καὶ τρέχειν καὶ πλεῖν, καὶ οἷον αὐτὸ λίθους καὶ ξύλα καὶ ἄλλα τὰ τοιαῦτα; . . . ΠΩΛ. Οὐκ, ἀλλὰ ταῦτα.

57. Hereafter, I will not mention objects instrumentally used for ends. This is consistent with Socrates' silence about them. However, all claims about actions undertaken instrumentally should be applicable to objects so used.

58. ΣΩ. Πότερον οὖν τὰ μεταξὺ ταῦτα ἔνεκεν τῶν ἀγαθῶν πράττουσιν ὅταν πράττωσιν ἢ τὰγαθὰ τῶν μεταξὺ; ΠΩΛ. Τὰ μεταξὺ δῆπου τῶν ἀγαθῶν (*Grg.* 468a5–b1).

59. ΣΩ. τὰ γὰρ ἀγαθὰ βουλόμεθα, ὡς φῆς σύ, τὰ δὲ μήτε ἀγαθὰ μήτε κακὰ οὐ βουλόμεθα, οὐδὲ τὰ κακὰ. ἢ οὐ; . . . ΠΩΛ. Ἀληθῆ.

(s5₁) People desire good things.

(s5₂) People do not desire intermediate things.⁶⁰

(s5₃) People do not desire bad things.

Note that (s5₁) is not submitted as a claim about all human desire. In other words, in committing to (s5₁), Socrates and Polus are not committing to the proposition that all human desires are for the good. Rather, (s5₁) pertains to those occasions when men undertake action for the sake of some good—even granted that such occasions constitute a large subset of the events that constitute human lives. But also, in committing to (s5₁), Socrates and Polus are affirming the specific point that the good is the object for the sake of which actions are undertaken when actions are undertaken for the sake of some object. In short, (s5₁) is affirmed as a claim about desiderative motivation in instrumental action. This is why in this passage, when Socrates and Polus commit to (s5₁), they also explicitly commit to (s5₂). (And, as we have confirmed, (s5₂) must mean that people do not terminally desire intermediate things.)

Unlike Socrates' and Polus' commitments to (s5₁) and (s5₂), then, their explicit commitment to (s5₃) is somewhat odd, for the idea that men desire bad things has not been entertained in their exchange; thus, denial of it would seem to be unnecessary. I suggest that Socrates' introduction of (s5₃) relates to the fact that the passage in which Socrates and Polus explicitly commit to (s5₁₋₃) begins with the following remarks (*Grg.* 468c2–4, already cited above): “Then, we do not desire to kill people, exile them from our cities, or steal their property simply so, but if these things are beneficial, we desire to do them, and if they are harmful, we do not desire to do them.” Accordingly, in eliciting Polus' confirmation of (s5₃), Socrates is stressing that these sorts of actions that orators or despots may undertake, which are conventionally conceived as horrible, are not undertaken for the sake of badness. Thus, while the actions themselves are atypical—in that few citizens ever perform them—insofar as the discussion concerns desiderative motivation in instrumental action, the psychology of the despots or orators does not differ from the psychology of others.

Granted that the context in which (s5₁) is affirmed implies that (s5₁) has a more specific meaning than that all desire is for the good, still, the context in which (s5₁) is affirmed, in particular in view of Socrates' and Polus' commitment to (s3₁), suggests that Socrates and Polus understand (s5₁) to mean that the objects for the sake of which action is undertaken are objectively good. And indeed, this is the case. On the other hand, there is very good reason to believe that Plato did not intend to endorse the view that health, wealth, and other such things are unqualifiedly good, and certainly that

60. Given (s1₄), (s5₂) should be interpreted to mean that people do not terminally desire intermediate things.

they are not axiologically on a par with wisdom. For example, Plato makes Socrates criticize this view in other early dialogues.⁶¹

I suggest that Plato makes Socrates employ (s3₁), and so also (s3₂), dialectically. As I emphasized above, the argument at *Gorgias* 466a4–468e5 concerns instrumental judgment as opposed to terminal judgment, in other words the αἰτία as opposed to the φύσις aspect of the knowledge that rhetoric would include were it truly a craft. Accordingly, Plato does not here have Socrates investigate and challenge conventional conceptions of goodness. Rather, he simplifies the argument by granting the conventional list of good things and bad things, and he focuses on instrumental judgment in terms of these. At the same time, this dialectical parameter is itself innocuous since most of Socrates' and Polus' contemporaries would regard the items in (s3₁) as good things, and their actions would be motivated toward them. Accordingly, (s5₁) and (s5₃) should be understood as commonsensical propositions. They are not introduced as axioms for a deductive science of human psychology, but as claims that, on empirical grounds, are generally true. In short, (s3₁₋₂) and (s5₁) and (s5₃) should be interpreted to imply that:

- (s6) When people undertake actions for the sake of certain ends, (generally,) people undertake those actions for the sake of things such as wisdom, health, and wealth.

Doing What One Thinks Best and Doing What One Desires

Granted (s6), Socrates and Polus now exchange the following (*Grg.* 468d1–7):

[Soc:] . . . if one man, be he a despot or an orator, kills or banishes from a city another man or confiscates his property, and [he performs the action] believing that it is better for himself [i.e., that the action is conducive to some good that he desires], yet it is worse [i.e., it conduces to something bad], then that man, I take it, does what seems best to him—correct? [Pol:] Yes. [Soc:] Then is it also the case that he does what he desires if these things are in fact bad [i.e., if what he does conduces to something bad]? . . . [Pol:] Okay, I think he does not do what he desires.⁶²

In short:

- (s7₁) If someone performs an action, thinking that it is beneficial, yet it is harmful, he does what he thinks best, but he does not do what he desires.

Thus, Socrates concludes that:

- (s8₁) One may do what one thinks best, but fail to do what one desires.

61. Compare *Meno* 78c; *Euthd.* 281d2–e1; *Ap.* 28b5–9, 29d7–e2, 30a7–b4; *Cri.* 48c6–d5.

62. ΣΩ. . . . εἴ τις ἀποκτείνει τινὰ ἢ ἐκβάλλει ἐκ πόλεως ἢ ἀφαιρεῖται χρήματα, εἴτε τύραννος ὢν εἴτε ῥήτωρ, οἴομενος ἀμεινον εἶναι αὐτῷ, τυγχάνει δὲ ὄν κάκιον, οὗτος δήπου ποιεῖ ἃ δοκεῖ αὐτῷ· ἢ γάρ; ΠΩΛ. Ναί. ΣΩ. Ἄρ' οὐν καὶ ἃ βούλεται, εἴπερ τυγχάνει ταῦτα κακὰ ὄντα; τί οὐκ ἀποκρίνη; ΠΩΛ. Ἄλλ' οὐ μοι δοκεῖ ποιεῖν ἃ βούλεται.

Let us clarify now how Socrates illuminates the distinction between (β) doing what one thinks best and (δ) doing what one desires. (β) is vague; it might mean one of two things:

(β_1): undertaking the means that one believes are conducive to a given end

(β_2): achieving the end that one believes is good.

Likewise, at least before the analysis of the second movement, (δ) might mean one of two things:

(δ_1): undertaking the means that one desires in order to achieve a given end

(δ_2): achieving the desired end.

Note that while the second movement involves an analysis of (δ), no analysis of (β) is made. The interpretations of (β) and (δ) upon which ($s7_1$) turns are (β_1) and (δ_2) respectively. Thus, the analysis involved in the second movement that is intended to illuminate the distinction between (β) and (δ) may be said to reveal that (β_1) is the assumed correct interpretation of (β).

Accordingly, ($s7_1$) should be interpreted as:

($s7_2$) If someone performs an action, thinking that it is beneficial, yet it is harmful, he does what he thinks best (that is, he acts according to his—in this case false—belief about how his action will achieve his terminal desire), but he does not do what he terminally desires (that is, he does not satisfy his terminal desire).

And so ($s8_1$) should be interpreted as:

($s8_2$) One may do what one thinks best (that is, perform the act that one believes is conducive to the satisfaction of one's terminal desire), but fail to do what one terminally desires (that is, fail to satisfy one's terminal desire).

Desire in ($s5_1$) and ($s7_2$)

McTighe argues that the argument of the second movement is fallacious, among other reasons because in ($s5_1$) Socrates uses “desire” *de dicto*, whereas in ($s7_2$) Socrates uses “desire” *de re*.⁶³

($s5_1$) states that people desire good things. Interpreted *de dicto*, ($s5_1$) means that people desire things that they value as good. Interpreted *de re*, ($s5_1$) means that there are things that are good and people desire those things. In support of his *de dicto* interpretation of ($s5_1$) McTighe argues as follows:

(1) Given the manner in which he has won Polus' support for this claim, it can only be given the *de dicto* reading, which is after all the natural reading. What exactly is this

63. 1984, 205–7; McTighe does not actually divide the argument into two movements.

“good” which all agents supposedly desire? Socrates names what he has in mind: popular goods like skill, health, wealth . . . (2) This “good” then is defined according to the agent’s conceptions of just what are the things in life worth aiming at and just what are the best means of attaining them in particular choice situations. In accordance with a long-standing tradition, let us call this “good” the “apparent good.”⁶⁴

McTighe infers (2) from (1); thus, (1) is McTighe’s argument for a *de dicto* interpretation of (s5₁). The argument of (1) is that the goods Socrates enumerates in (s3₁) are “popular.” So, McTighe is arguing that because the goods in (s3₁) are not real goods, but only goods popularly conceived, then (s5₁) must be interpreted *de dicto*. McTighe’s argument fails for the following reason. It is true that most of the entities enumerated in (s3₁) are not entities that Socrates elsewhere regards as real goods. However, as I have shown above, in his particular argument with Polus, Socrates treats these entities as real goods. Recall that (s3₁) is elicited as a claim about what entities are good; it is not elicited as a claim about what entities people generally regard as good. Therefore, according to the context in which (s3₁) is introduced, “desire” in (s5₁) is most accurately interpreted *de re*.⁶⁵

I agree with McTighe that Socrates uses “desire” in (s7₂) *de re*. Therefore, Socrates uses “desire” consistently in (s5₁) and (s7₂).

Desire for the Good

As we noted in the introduction, the argument at *Gorgias* 466a4–468e5, particularly the second movement, has been considered important in providing evidence of Socrates’ conception of the proposition that all people desire the good. Originally I referred to this proposition as (D), and in the course of the discussion of the argument I have referred to it as (s5₁). As we discussed, commentators have proposed several interpretations of (D). The following considerations orient my assessment of these proposed interpretations and my own interpretation of (D). First, Socrates’ commitments in *Gorgias* 466a4–468e5, whatever they may be, need not be consistent with Socrates’ commitments elsewhere. It is imprudent to generalize about a Socratic conception of (D) before one has made a thorough examination of

64. *Ibid.*, 206. I have inserted numerals.

65. Weiss tries to make a similar argument, though by different means. She claims: “Until 468c3–5 [for example, in (s4)], the good things for the sake of which means are chosen are not to be understood as what is truly good for one but rather what one perceives as good for one, that is, apparent goods. The introduction at 468b1 and 468b3–4 of the expression ‘the good’ (τὸ ἀγαθόν) in the singular, however, to replace the plural ‘good things’ used consistently until that point (468a5, 468a6, 468b1, and 468c5), serves to facilitate the shift at 468c3–5 from what one perceives as good to what is truly beneficial” (1992, 306–7 n. 18). Weiss’s motivation for claiming that initially the desiderata of which Socrates speaks are to be understood as apparently good is that the set of goods that Socrates enumerates in (s3₁) are not entities that Socrates really believes are good. They are conventionally conceived goods and so—she concludes—apparent goods. Consider her remarks: “Socrates, let us note, begins early on to distance himself from the notion that conventionally good things are truly good things: in the very act of listing them he attributes them to Polus. At 467e4–5, Socrates says to Polus: ‘And *you* say that the good things are wisdom, health, wealth, and all other such things?’ It is my view that although Socrates realizes that people in fact want these ἀγαθά, they do not all count for him as unqualifiedly good things” (*ibid.*). I have emphasized, however, that although Socrates himself does not actually believe that all the items in (s3₁) are unqualifiedly good, in the argument of the second movement, for dialectical reasons, he treats them as though they were. Thus, there is no shift from apparent to actual goods.

the individual passages in which (D) occurs or to which (D) is relevant. Of course, in examining individual passages, one cannot escape the hermeneutic circle. However, enough controversy persists over the interpretation of individual passages to begin by focusing on these. I am, then, concerned with the evidence that the *Gorgias* argument provides.

Second, the phrase “the good” or rather the Greek phrase τὸ ἀγαθόν is ambiguous. It can be used in place of a general term equivalent to “goodness,” or it can be used as a quantifier phrase equivalent to “that which is good.” As a general term, the phrase may further be interpreted in terms of the metaphysics of Forms to refer to the Form of goodness. The context in which the phrase is used should be decisive for such an interpretation. If the metaphysical concept of Form is not even implicit in the context of the interlocutors’ exchange, it should be inferred that Socrates is not using the phrase to mean *the Form of goodness*. Obviously, within the conceptual frame of their exchange, Socrates and Polus are not concerned with Forms. Furthermore, on the assumption that the phrase is being used quantificationally, it has been suggested that the singular τὸ ἀγαθόν, in contrast to the plural τὰγαθά, indicates that (D) is to be interpreted as *people desire that which is (really) good*, in contrast to *people desire that which (they believe) is good*.⁶⁶ This is simply mistaken. The singular as well as the plural can be interpreted in either way. Again, contextual considerations must be decisive here.

In light of these remarks and the foregoing interpretation of the argument at 466a4–468e5, it is clear that most of my predecessors’ interpretations of (D) are, indeed, extravagant departures from the textual evidence. Nowhere in the argument or its relevant vicinity is there mention or intimation of a true self or of a true motivational state of the soul. Thus, the Neoplatonic interpretation is unwarranted.⁶⁷

As for Segvic’s interpretation, while Socrates does, in the second movement, illuminate the structure of desiderative motivation in cases of instrumental action, he does not introduce a special conception of desire or want that occurs only when the desideratum is actually good. Nor is such an idea intimated or implicit in the discussion. Nowhere in the argument does Socrates distinguish desire for apparent or conventionally conceived goods from desire for actual or true goods. In short, when he speaks of desiring goods or desiring that which is good, there is no indication that he means “desire” in an extraordinary sense; Segvic’s interpretation is unwarranted.

Crucial to the second movement is the distinction between means and ends and the claim that means are desired only insofar as they conduce to desired ends. But the scope of these points is limited. Socrates’ point is that in a given instance of instrumental action, the agent undertakes the action in order to attain an end to which the action is thought rather directly and, so to speak, locally to conduce. Penner’s interpretation unjustifiably extends this point by claiming that there is an ultimate and actual good for the sake

66. Weiss 1992, 306–7 n. 18, on which see n. 65 above.

67. The subjectivist interpretation (on which see n. 9 above) is also incompatible with the evidence of the second movement since, as I have argued, in (s5₁) and (s7₂) Socrates consistently uses “desire” *de re*.

of which all our actions are undertaken. In the *Gorgias* argument Socrates does not speak of ultimate goods or any ultimate good toward which the activity of human life on the whole strives.⁶⁸

The argument does not engage the question of whether desire has an ultimate object or whether wealth and health, in addition to wisdom, are components of that ultimate good. Rather, in view of the context of *Gorgias* 466a4–468e5 in which (D), which is to say (s5₁) occurs, (s5₁) must be interpreted as a rather unremarkable and uncontroversial claim: most people tend to undertake particular instrumental actions because they desire by these actions to gain wisdom, wealth, health, and the like, things which truly are good.

Finally—to turn to the *ad hominem* interpretation—Socrates (or rather Plato) himself does not believe that health and wealth are real goods on a par with wisdom. Rather, he uses (s5₁), as he uses (s3₁), dialectically. Moreover, while (s5₁) and (s3₁) conform to Polus' beliefs, Socrates' use of these propositions does not depend on Polus' character or commitments *per se*. Again, (s5₁) and (s3₁) reflect conventional beliefs. As such, Socrates' use of (s5₁) is not *ad hominem* in the specific sense that, in a deliberate effort to refute Polus, Socrates employs (s5₁) against Polus—knowing that because of Polus' particular character or commitments, he will accept (s5₁)⁶⁹—and regardless of his own attitude toward (s5₁). Socrates could have refuted Polus with a similar argument, but one that included his belief that wisdom alone is a true good. However, that would have excessively complicated the argument because it would have required a sub-argument that wisdom is the only true good. Moreover, that would have compromised the dialectical structure of the Polus episode as a whole, for, as I have suggested, the first argument against Polus, at least obliquely, concerns itself with orators' lack of causal knowledge, while the second argument focuses on orators' lack of identity knowledge. In short, Socrates employs (D) dialectically, but not *ad hominem*.

Summary of the Second Movement

The second movement employs the following central premises to conclude that (s8₂) doing what one thinks best (that is, performing the act that one believes is conducive to the satisfaction of one's terminal desire) is not equivalent to doing what one terminally desires (that is, satisfying one's terminal desire):

- (s1₄) When one acts for the sake of an end, one (terminally) desires that end, and one merely (instrumentally) desires the act.

68. Penner's interpretation of (D) is not merely intended to represent accurately Socrates' conception of desire in *Gorgias* and other Platonic dialogues; Penner also attempts to defend Socrates' conception of desire against the conception of desire dominant throughout the Western philosophical tradition. I do not believe that Penner's Socratic conception of desire, whether or not Socratic, is in itself defensible. But here is not the place to explain why.

69. On *argumentum ad hominem*, see, for instance, Copi 1968, 75–76.

- (s2) All things are good, bad, or intermediate.
- (s4) People do intermediate things for the sake of good things.
- (s5) People (terminally) desire good things, not intermediate things.
- (s7₂) If someone performs an action, thinking that it is beneficial, yet it is harmful, he does what he thinks best (that is, he acts according to his—in this case false—belief about how his action will achieve his terminal desire), but he does not do what he terminally desires (that is, he does not satisfy his terminal desire).

(s1₄) and (s2) are alethic. (s4) and (s5), like (s3₁), are dialectically expedient. And (s7₂), which partially depends on all the preceding, is, accordingly, in part dialectically expedient. The argument is valid, but only partly alethic.

Furthermore, although the second movement is not purely alethic insofar as it contains premises that Socrates employs as dialectical expedients, it is not therefore *ad hominem*. Moreover, its conclusion is not radically at odds with a conclusion that Socrates would endorse. Assuming that Socrates actually believes that people desire the good *de dicto*, then, Socrates would claim that one may undertake an action according to one's (false) belief about how the action is conducive to an end desired *de dicto*, yet in performing that action fail to satisfy one's terminal desire *de dicto*.

CONCLUSION

Socrates' argument with Polus should be understood as conforming with a prominent theme of the dialogue and of the early dialogues still more broadly. *Gorgias* shares with Plato's other early dialogues a theme that I have elsewhere discussed and defined as the conflict of philosophy and non-philosophy.⁷⁰ As Plato characterizes it in the early dialogues, philosophy is not a body of knowledge that has been achieved through the exercise of a technique or method. Rather, philosophy is a pursuit of knowledge, specifically the ethical knowledge that Plato believes constitutes human excellence and so conduces to well being. The characteristic discursive style of philosophy is logical argumentation. In contrast, nonphilosophy encompasses all those discursive practices whose objectives and methods or manners, in Plato's view, do not conform to those of philosophy. As Socrates defines it in *Gorgias*, rhetoric is a type of nonphilosophy; and as such, Plato's basic intention in *Gorgias* can be viewed as to pit philosophy and rhetoric against one another and to expose their respective characters and values.

Like philosophy, rhetoric is not a body of knowledge. As Socrates says, rhetoric is not a craft (τέχνη). Instead, rhetoric is a competence, acquired and developed through practice, but not through the learning of principles.

70. Wolfsdorf 2004.

The rhetorician, therefore, operates according to intuitions that have been more or less effectively trained through experience. The competence of rhetoric is employed to persuade individuals to hold beliefs, above all practical beliefs, and so to act accordingly. Since the orator *per se* does not possess knowledge in any given domain, rhetoric can only persuade those who also lack the relevant knowledge. As such, the orator persuades his audience to hold certain beliefs not by explaining their truth, but by non-rational means, specifically by pleasing his audience. Indeed, Plato conceives of rhetoric as involved with pleasure, in contrast to goodness.⁷¹ And since pleasure is merely a semblance (εἰδωλον) of goodness, the orator promotes conditions that are not of the best kind. On the contrary, Plato regards the most effective orators as fostering especially bad conditions. In sum, rhetoric is radically at odds with philosophy in its end as well as its means.

In composing Socrates' and Polus' arguments at 466a4–468e5 Plato largely brackets the problem of ends and concentrates on means. Plato treats this topic both in respect of the interlocutors' respective discursive styles and competencies and in respect of the content of the argument itself. Socrates' strength and Polus' weakness in philosophical argumentation are displayed, and Socrates shows Polus that it is possible to do what one thinks best while failing to do what one desires insofar as one may have a misconception of the means to a given end.

In the second argument of the Polus episode, as Socrates claims that it is better to suffer harm than to do it, Plato turns to the topic of ends. Insofar as this ultimately requires demonstrating that goodness is not identical to pleasure and that the value of the former far exceeds the value of the latter, the topic preoccupies Socrates and his interlocutors for the remainder of the dialogue.

Speaking more generally, my explication of *Gorgias* 466a4–468e5 as a dialectical argument illustrates some of the particular complexities of arguments in Plato's early dialogues. These complexities do not pertain to the, so to speak, bare logical structure of arguments, for instance, to the quantity of premises and their implications or to the nesting of sub-arguments within arguments—although some Platonic arguments obviously are complex in this respect. Rather, the complexities pertain firstly to the pragmatics of discourse. They concern the intentions of the interlocutors, their attitudes toward the propositions they contribute to the argument, and the reasons why they have those particular attitudes. Secondly, the complexities of the arguments pertain to Plato's intentions in composing the characters' discursive contributions, including their attitudes, as such. Put simply, the interpreter must not merely be satisfied with determining that a dramatic character says *p* and has such-and-such an attitude toward *p*; one must also determine why Plato composes that character's utterance and attitude as such. These complexities indicate why so-called analytic interpretations

71. As Socrates says, “[rhetoric is a competence] of producing a sort of gratification and pleasure” (*Grg.* 462c7).

that ignore the literary or dramatic dimensions of the texts are naïve and bound to yield inaccurate results. Consequently, there is a pressing need among Plato scholars to develop, or at least adapt, more sophisticated conceptual resources by means of which to understand how argumentation operates in the dialogues. That this need should be urged on the basis of a reading of rhetoric's inadequate means in *Gorgias* 466a4–468e5 is ultimately ironic, for the resources that we interpreters of Plato here need will certainly derive from, among other places, the study of rhetoric.

Temple University

LITERATURE CITED

- Anagnostopoulos, M. 2003. Desire for Good in the *Meno*. In *Desire, Identity, Existence*, ed. N. Reshotko, 171–91. Kelowna.
- Benson, H. H., ed. 1992. *Essays in the Philosophy of Socrates*. Oxford.
- Brickhouse, T. C., and N. D. Smith. 1994. *Plato's Socrates*. Oxford.
- Dancy, R. M. 2004. *Plato's Introduction of Forms*. Cambridge.
- Dodds, E. R. 1959. *Plato: "Gorgias."* Oxford.
- Hall, R. W. 1971. *Techne and Morality in the Gorgias*. In *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. J. Anton and G. Kustas, 202–18. Albany, N.Y.
- Irwin, T. 1979. *Plato: "Gorgias."* Oxford.
- McTighe, K. 1984. Socrates on the Desire for Good and the Involuntariness of Wrongdoing: *Gorgias* 466a–468e. *Phronesis* 29: 193–236.
- Nakhnikian, G. 1973. The First Socratic Paradox. *JHPH* 11: 1–17.
- Penner, T. 1991. Desire and Power in Socrates: The Argument of *Gorgias* 466A–468E that Orators and Tyrants Have No Power in the City. *Apeiron* 24: 147–202.
- Penner, T., and C. J. Rowe. 1994. The Desire for Good: Is the *Meno* Inconsistent with the *Gorgias*? *Phronesis* 39: 1–25.
- Santas, G. X. 1964. The Socratic Paradoxes. *Philosophical Review* 73: 147–64.
- . 1979. *Socrates: Philosophy in Plato's Early Dialogues*. New York.
- Segvic, H. 2000. No One Errs Willingly: The Meaning of Socratic Intellectualism. *OSAP* 19: 1–45.
- Weiss, R. 1985. Ignorance, Involuntariness, and Innocence: A Reply to McTighe. *Phronesis* 30: 314–22.
- . 1992. Killing, Confiscating, Banishing at *Gorgias* 466–468. *Ancient Philosophy* 12: 299–315.
- . 2001. *Virtue in the Cave*. Oxford.
- Wolfsdorf, D. 2004. Interpreting Plato's Early Dialogues. *OSAP* 27: 15–41.