

## Commentary on “A Man of No Substance: The Philosopher in Plato’s *Gorgias*” by S. Montgomery Ewegen

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### Abstract

This commentary begins by analyzing two textual selections about death in the *Gorgias* (486a7-b4 and 526e4-527a4) in order to expand upon Ewegen’s portrayal of Socrates. I close by briefly giving voice to another, perhaps more familiar side of Socrates’ rhetorical approach in the dialogue in order to provide some further perspective about Ewegen’s claims.

### Keywords

Plato—*Gorgias* afterlife myth—Callicles—Power—Noble death

### Commentary

Ewegen’s paper has provoked me to think about the *Gorgias*, as well as Socrates’ death, in new ways. In order to explain this, I would like to turn first to one of Ewegen’s textual selections and examine it in further detail. Callicles, in his assessment of Socrates’ way of life, predicts Socrates’ harsh demise. He says:

For now, if someone seized you or anybody else (. . .) and carried you off to prison, claiming that you were doing an injustice when you were not, you know that you would not have anything of use to do for yourself, but you would be dizzy and gaping, without anything to say; and when you stood up in the law court, happening to face a very lowly and vicious accuser, you would die, if he wished to demand the death penalty for you. (486a7-b4)<sup>1</sup>

Plato, in his portrayal of Callicles’ foretelling, directs the reader to conclude that Callicles’ assessment of Socrates’ fate is correct in a way. Socrates will die unjustly at the hands of accusers who are “lowly and vicious” (φάυλου καὶ μοχθηροῦ, 486b3).<sup>2</sup> He will be powerless to save himself. Socrates does not correct Callicles. Rather, he responds by saying that he has found the best way to care for his soul, and implies that he will continue to do that. (486d) Socrates speaks similarly in the *Apology*, saying that when

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<sup>1</sup> Translations from the *Gorgias* henceforth are by James H. Nichols Jr.

<sup>2</sup> All Greek references are to Burnet’s Oxford edition.

one is doing what is best, one must remain there and continue to do so, even risking life and limb. (28d-e) Here, in these lines of the *Gorgias*, I contend, following Ewegen's lead, that Plato directs the reader to the ultimate expression of the practice of philosophy—the art that takes men and makes them physically worse, as Callicles indicates—the art that denigrates their physical substance. The ultimate expression of the practice of philosophy, then, is to die as a philosopher. It is not only any death that characterizes a true philosopher. Rather, it is a death received from those who are “lowly and vicious”. It is a death imposed by those whose assertions, arguments, and ways of life have been fodder for the philosopher's practice throughout his life. The philosopher receives death just as he receives opposition throughout life—by acknowledging and absorbing the truth of it—even if that truth is part of a caustic or poisonous mixture. This is what Socrates does in the quotation above—he receives Callicles' argument, including the harsh truths mixed with his faulty position. The one who practices philosophy does not, then, respond as a sophistic rhetor—a man of power—does, with popular opinion or selfish interest as one's touchstone. Rather, the philosopher responds with truth as his only touchstone, “the best such stone,” (486d4) as Socrates says in the lines just following the above text. The philosopher, when responding to interlocutors in the language of a soul with truth as *the* point of reference, has the tendency to confound those whose touchstone is the mere appearance of truth. The ultimate way in which the philosopher confounds his audience, then, is by letting himself die a noble death—ignoble if popular opinion is his touchstone, but fine and beautiful if that touchstone is truth. In this way, then, Ewegen's line of thought sheds new light on philosophy as practice for dying. The Socratic death, it can be argued, is the ultimate retreat, or self-effacement, to use Ewegen's terminology, that gives birth to the λόγος.

I would now briefly like to draw our attention to the closing myth, which Ewegen mentions toward the end of his paper. In the *Gorgias*' myth of the afterlife (523a-527a), the powerful not only receive the harshest punishments, (525c-d) but are Socrates' prime example of those whose souls are scarred and deformed from living unjustly (See especially 525d-526b).<sup>3</sup> In that mythical

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<sup>3</sup> The question of what the soul is in the *Gorgias* is worth addressing, at least briefly. Seth Benardete explains that the “soul is simply the soul as rhetoric and morality have conceived of it, a metaphorical extension of body with a life of its own.” See Benardete 1991, 100. I do not completely agree with this, but it is a view worth considering, since there is no substantive argument for the nature of the soul in the *Gorgias*. I do contend that an immortal soul is at least implied in the dialogue, for instance in the closing myth.

rational account, it is the powerful who are least capable of caring for their souls in life, and who are therefore the most vulnerable after the separation of their souls from their bodies. After describing the way in which souls are tried naked and then either punished or rewarded, (523c-526d) Socrates turns Callicles' argument above on its head, saying:

I reproach you that you will not be able to help yourself, when you have the judgment and the trial of which I was speaking just now; but when you have come to that judge (. . .) and when that one seizes you and brings you in, you will be gaping and dizzy there no less than I here, and perhaps someone will dishonorably strike you a crack on the jaw and completely trample you in the mud. (526e4-527a4)

According to Socrates, those who are the standard-bearers of Calliclean values—the will to power, popular opinion, self-interest—are vulnerable to the sort of vicious denigration Callicles predicts for Socrates, but in a more severe way. Socrates does not go as far as predicting Callicles' psychic death, though the latter foresaw Socrates' bodily death, but the afterlife punishment Socrates describes is more permanent than bodily death. It is a fate suffered either indefinitely or for as long as it takes for one's soul to recover from the denigration and deformation self-imposed on one's immaterial substance. This mythical rational account could be interpreted both literally and metaphorically, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Literally, the consequence for allowing one's soul to fester with injustice involves having those offenses exposed, and then either suffering fitting purgations until one is cured, or being flung into an underworld pit of torment for eternity. Metaphorically, one could argue that Callicles' way of life necessitates eventually being exposed—perhaps to oneself, perhaps to others—and the result of such exposure will be some sort of suffering, which may be very long term. Either way, those who opt for a life like Callicles' will suffer psychic torments, and will be humbled or reduced in both material and immaterial status.

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<sup>4</sup> Forte 2016, 187-208.

Notable metaphorical readings of the myth: Edmonds 2004, 166; Ferrari 2012, 69; Fussi 2001, 535; Grosso 1971, 75; Guthrie 1975, 307; Emmanuel Levinas, according to Stähler 2008, 73; Rowe 2012, 193; Sedley 2009, 53; Stöcklein 1937, 11, 22-28; and Hirsch 1971, 312.

Others, like myself, who explicitly consider a metaphorical reading alongside a figurative one: Hitchcock 1974, 129-130; Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's Gorgias*, 46.3, 46.4; and Russell 2001, 559-564.

They will lose the physical substance they treasure most highly—fine clothes, status, wealth, and so on—and will also have their psychic substance, which they have allowed to be ruined—face the truth of its future. This does not end in a death for the soul though—let alone a noble one. The noble death is an empowering dignity that the philosopher gets, to follow Ewegen’s line of thought and combine it with my own. This of course implies the indestructibility of the soul, and is part of Socrates’ thesis that the good person cannot be harmed in life or death (527d). The one who seems least powerful then, actually possesses the greatest power according to the dialogue, expressed in its final myth: the power of invincibility in the face of the ultimate contest—the one in which the victory of the soul is at stake.

Though it is clear that I largely agree with Ewegen’s line of thinking, I will end here by suggesting that we give voice to another side of this account: Socrates’ positive attempt to persuade his audience. On the one hand, though Socrates does advance his position, paradoxically, by retreat and self-effacement, on the other, he also advances arguments in attempts to persuade his audience. In other words, his approach to his interlocutors is not completely portrayed by his receptive posture. He may even make use of rhetorical tricks in advancing his arguments.<sup>5</sup> The fact that those who argue for the latter largely claim that they are *ad hominem* attacks, leaves open the possibility that any of Socrates’ positive attempts to persuade are done for the sake of the souls of his audience—so if he is portrayed as arguing against the person, it could be simply because he is doing it *for* the person, and not because he sees such techniques as the best way to advance λόγος. Furthermore, many of the conclusions for which he argues are incredibly unique and compelling. They have the distinct “brand” of Socrates. Even if his efforts are more about promoting the λόγος than himself, he is quite present in those λόγος as their champion. But it is not the purpose of Ewegen’s paper, as I understand it, or my comments, to add to the vast body of scholarship on Socrates’ hypotheses in the *Gorgias*, or the possibility that he advances these using techniques that bear similarity in some ways to the very rhetoric he criticizes. Rather, my comments here are meant to echo Ewegen’s portrayal of an underappreciated aspect of the complex character that is Socrates in the *Gorgias*: a figure who confounds his audience and advances the λόγος by means of withdrawal, receptivity, and an acceptance of the diminution of his wealth and social standing even to the point of physical death.

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<sup>5</sup> Three notables who argue that Socrates commits fallacies are Kahn 1983, 75-121 (all three of Socrates’ arguments are *ad hominem*), McTigue 1984, 193-236 (Socrates commits *ad hominem* against Polus), and Vlastos 1967, 454-460.

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