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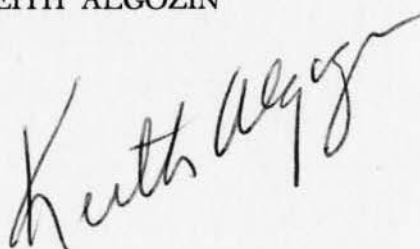
Faith and Silence in Plato's "Gorgias"

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BY

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Keith Algozin". The signature is written in dark ink and is slanted downwards from left to right. The letters are connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the last name.

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FAITH AND SILENCE IN PLATO'S *GORGIAS*

AT THE CLIMAX of his dispute with Socrates over the nature of man Callicles refuses to go on answering Socrates's questions and stands silent while Socrates recapitulates and finishes the argument alone (*Gorgias*, 506c-509). Throughout the rest of the dialogue Callicles remains recalcitrant, breaking his silence only to sneer at Socrates or continue perfunctorily a conversation in which he has obviously little interest. At first glance Callicles's silence seems to represent the stubborn embarrassment of a man who knows he is defeated, but is refusing to admit it. He had maintained the profligate's thesis that the good for man is identical with states of pleasure but has been led by Socrates to admit the need for self-control guided by knowledge of the difference between good and evil pleasures and pains (499b). Now, with Callicles silent, and at the urging of Gorgias himself, Socrates goes on to complete the argument by supplying the ultimate standard by which men are to distinguish good from evil pleasures and pains—the wisdom which has guided his every word in his three conversations with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles: "Wise men say, Callicles, that heaven and earth, gods and men, are held together by the principles of sharing, by friendship and order, by self-control and justice" (508). But clearly this conclusion goes beyond the premise Callicles has agreed to; Callicles could grant the need for self-control while logically refusing to place it at the service of friendship, the particular standard announced by Socrates: the tyrant too knows self-discipline. This insight that Callicles stands on firm ground in his silence can help to interpret this dramatic incident in Plato's *Gorgias*. By making a point of Callicles's silence during Socrates's declaration of his ultimate wisdom Plato provides, not a signal of

Callicles's defeat, but the appropriate counter-declaration of the tyrannical soul.

To be sure, Callicles shifts his position during his conversation with Socrates, but his movement is steadily away from Socrates until in his silence he stands exposed as the exact opposite of Socrates. This movement occurs in three main steps as Socrates presses for clarification of Callicles's initial assertion that "nature herself reveals it to be only just and proper that the better man should lord it over his inferior . . . the stronger over the weaker" (483d). In the first step Socrates leads Callicles to dismiss as better or stronger the mass of men which has the actual physical strength of numbers (488c-489d). Second, he leads Callicles to dismiss as better or stronger the fools and cowards whose desire is for merely bodily pleasure (494b-499b). It is at this point that Callicles admits the need for self-control. The third and final step in Callicles's movement of self-clarification is his silence itself: by the better, stronger man Callicles means ultimately himself as opposed to all other men. His silence asserts his character itself, the unsharable truth, which he alone can fully understand and appreciate, that he is the master and all other men his slaves. Callicles is the despotic soul whose portrait Plato draws so vividly too in the *Republic*, that soul whose hitherto disparate appetites for fragmentary pleasures have come to be ruled by the "great winged drone," the insatiable master passion for power which takes as reality the lunatic's dream of lording it over all mankind and heaven besides (*Republic*, 572).

The clarification of Callicles as residing ultimately in the tacit commitment to his tyranny over others is to be contrasted with the movements of self-clarification undergone in Socrates's presence by the two previous speakers in the dialogue, Gorgias and Polus. For the main line of meaning in the dialogue runs from the opening question about who Gorgias is (447d) to the final revelation in Callicles's silence of the distorted depths of Gorgias's own soul.

In the opening conversation Gorgias falls into a self-contra-

diction when he both disclaims responsibility for the injustices of his students and yet claims that his students become just men in his presence (457b-461): he both does and does not make just men of those who come under his influence. This contradiction, which lies at the core of Gorgias's personality, rises to the surface under the pressure of the questioning presence of Socrates. In being ashamed to admit to Socrates that he is not an example of human excellence to his students Gorgias in effect confesses his own deepest aspiration. In his shame in the presence of Socrates Gorgias has made contact with his own humanity, and now, while others speak he remains in the background following the argument intensely, so intensely that he will urge Socrates to continue when Callicles falls silent. The event of "conversion" in the presence of Socrates is now repeated in the next conversation between Socrates and Gorgias's student Polus.

Polus admires the tyrant, and in order to refute Socrates's contention that tyrants are unhappy and powerless because they cannot fulfill their own deepest desire to be just men he first cites historical cases of self-satisfied tyranny (470c-471d) and then invites Socrates to ask the opinions of those listening to their conversation (473e). Socrates, however, would produce but one witness to the truth, Polus himself (474), and he asks Polus whether it is uglier to do or to suffer injustice (474b). Polus responds that doing injustice is uglier than suffering it, but, as Socrates helps him see, by ugly he really means evil, and so in fact he himself does agree with Socrates that tyrannical action contradicts a man's own good. In Polus's abrupt about-face we once again glimpse Socrates performing the eminently just action of education for which he was condemned. With his question as to whether doing or suffering injustice is uglier he has lifted Polus out of the context of mutual reprisal, where tyranny might be considered excusable as the fitting response forced upon one by the threats of others, and has placed before him the entire spectacle of mutual invasion itself, asking him whether it suits his own aspiration for

fulfillment, whether Polus himself could *initiate* the violence. When Polus responds, face to face with Socrates, that to do so would be ugly he expresses the distance between himself and tyrannical self-assertion. Beneath his superficial admiration of the tyrant Polus is revulsed by tyrannical action. Socrates's questioning presence has touched this nerve of Polus's humanity, as it had touched that of Gorgias before him, bringing him to life as a man.

To be sure, we are not to make too much of Polus's conversion. His tone throughout his conversation with Socrates indicates clearly that he is well on the way toward becoming like Callicles, the next speaker, who will interpret Polus's admission that tyranny is ugly as influenced not by Polus's nature but by convention (482d). By bracketing Polus's admission between Gorgias's more positive eagerness to dissociate himself from injustice and Callicles's more deadly silence Plato has both fixed Polus at the mid-point on a scale of growing insensitivity to Socratic friendship and has suggested his movement from Gorgias, the teacher, to Callicles, the thoroughly corrupt product of Gorgias's teaching. Polus's confrontation with Socrates jolts him off course only momentarily. Socrates too is on the way toward Callicles, the human type that will condemn him for corrupting the youth, and he has not enough time remaining to help Polus establish this newly awakened revulsion at evil as the ruling passion of his soul.

The conversions undergone by both Gorgias and Polus in the presence of Socrates bring into sharp relief Plato's intention in having Callicles be silent during the speech in which Socrates links self-control to friendship. Face to face with Socrates, at the same point at which Gorgias was overcome with shame and Polus experienced revulsion at initiating the violence, Callicles remains rooted in that unregenerate commitment to tyrannical self-assertion for which silence is the appropriate expression. Callicles loves violating other men, loves tyranny for its own sake. Socrates had already recognized this loving commitment of Callicles's when in his first speech to Callicles he stressed

that both of them are lovers, he of wisdom, Callicles of power (481c). And now, in Callicles's silence during Socrates's declaration of friendship, Socrates cannot but hear Callicles's counter-declaration that self-controlled dedication to principle is as much a part of the life of tyranny as of the life of friendship. In Callicles's silence Socrates's self-disciplined friendship confronts an equally self-disciplined, unyielding, love of tyrannical power, Plato pours into his construction of this confrontation his own recognition of the purity, the spirituality if you will, of the love of tyrannical power, which is in every way the matching opposite of the Socratic love of friendship.

This suggestion that Callicles and Socrates are spiritual counterparts implies that in the conversation between them every key concept—nature, convention, freedom, power, happiness, justice, friendship, speech, etc.—has an opposite meaning depending upon whether Socrates or Callicles defines it. But in the remarks that follow I will seek to secure, not the opposite meanings of each of these specific concepts, but rather the general framework which contains them all, the spirituality Socrates and Callicles have in common, as well as the point at which they come into opposition. To this end it will be helpful to characterize briefly the human condition which elicits from both the fundamentally human spiritual response.

Socrates and Callicles have in common what all men have in common by virtue of the human condition itself, namely, the issue of staying in contact with the truth of the world. That a man's fundamental issue is contact with the truth of the world is strikingly expressed by Plato himself in his fable of the human puppets in the *Laws* (644d): The situation of every man is that of a puppet whose opposed interior states pull him like cords toward opposite actions, the gentle tug of the golden cord of judgment toward citizenship, the violent, iron-like tugs of private pleasure and pain toward self-assertion. For our present purpose the importance of Plato's image of the puppets lies not in its location of every man between citizenship and self-assertion, but in its poignant depiction of every man's situa-

tion of being open to a world whose ultimate meaning is unknown: like puppets we lack the puppet master's knowledge of the meaning of the show. Sensing that something is at stake in our lives but uncertain as to what it is, we do not know how to perform so as not to spoil the play. It is this specifically human condition of ignorance about the meaning of the whole which places every man in the distinctively spiritual issue of locating and maintaining contact with the truth which governs, not just this or that part of the world, but the world entire. For within the ignorance of the ultimate meaning of the world there lurks the horror of unattunement with the world, the horror of doing what violates the truth of the world or what is trivial, accidental, passing, as against what is substantial or enduring because it is the ultimate meaning, or purpose, which holds sway throughout the world itself. This horror of unattunement with the world can be dispelled only by the belief that one is performing in one's every action the ultimate task which the world itself essentially is and which all things in the world are called to enact so that, as in a well-formed play, every part achieves in the manner appropriate to it the proper attunement of all to all. In such perfectly attuned action, which is the spiritual goal that the human condition of ignorance sets before every man, a man would be alive in the properly human essence: that of himself which should rule his life would be actually ruling that of himself which should be subordinate, and he would be the rightly ordered place through which the work of the world is done as it ought to be done by a man in the world. Here a man would be representative of all mankind in the sense of a revelation to all men of the meaning of being human in the world. And now, Plato would have us understand, I believe, that both Socrates and Callicles are men of such spiritual commitment, men whose self-discipline stems ultimately from the effort to maintain and represent man's proper attunement to the world. By letting Callicles be silent during Socrates's statement of his wisdom, and by doing so against the background of the contrasting assent by Gorgias

and Polus to the spiritual force of Socrates's personality, Plato effectively suggests that Socrates and Callicles are two equally forceful spiritual claims to be the model or representative man whom all other men are to pattern themselves upon in order to come alive in their properly human nature and stand in the truth of the world.

But, while Socrates and Callicles are equally spiritual through their common concern to be the properly ordered, representatively human place through which the truth of the world flows among men, this truth itself differs radically in each case. For Socrates "heaven and earth, gods and men, are held together by the principles of sharing, by friendship and order, by self-control and justice." And, in the face of Callicles's silence, he goes on: "that, my friend, is the reason wise men call the universe cosmos, and not disorder or licentiousness." The wholeness of the universe of existing things, the ground which is itself no existent thing among others but which embracingly binds all existent things into a whole, is the event of friendship, the event of each thing being most itself by drawing the others into their proper partnership in the whole, their capacity to create the whole by evoking this capacity in still others, so that all things are engaged in mutually eliciting, or enlivening, each other's capacity to form a whole in which all co-exist as partners in simultaneous fulfillment. Just as the gods, the powers of nature, form the immortal natural cosmos by mutually evoking each other's partnership in the whole, so too men are to form the city in the image of this natural cosmos by mutually evoking each other's power to be citizens. And, as we have glimpsed in Socrates's encounters with Gorgias and Polus, Socrates himself is the place where this essence of the world occurs among men: Socrates fulfills himself by drawing from Gorgias and Polus their own capacity to fulfill themselves in community with Socrates. Such educative friendship is Socrates's very attunement to the essence of the universe. Who *he* is is the true statesman (521d), the human image of the ground, the unbiased meeting point wherein all things can in-

tersect as mutually fulfilling, intercommunicating partners in the creation of a self-enlivening public order. His life is this event of evoking in others the moral agency which is their own capacity to create and maintain the city, i. e., evoke it in still others. Such friendship, the mutual creation of the city in time in the image of Socrates, who images the gods, who image the eternal ground, is truly human life. And in this context Callicles's silent, self-assertive rebellion against the divine in man is a living human death.

For Callicles, on the other hand, the universe of existent things is essentially disorder, strife, the war of everything against every other thing in which each thing's unsharable fulfillment—mastery—is each other thing's unfulfillment—slavery. To be sure, from within Callicles's own private, egoistic perspective, all things appear as facets of an ordered whole: each thing is an instrument for furthering his own mastery over others. But when Callicles universalizes this egoism, attributing it to all, he must find between himself and others, not Socrates's self-enlivening community, but rather the precisely opposite event of an explosion into nothing, each part's tyranny over the others eliciting, as in the game of hands upon hands, the other's tyranny over it—a mutually heightening fragmentation whose outer limit is the chaos of part outside part outside part. In this Calliclesian universe Socratic friendship is seen as merely a surface phenomenon, at best our unstable contract to use each other for the time against a common enemy, be it physical nature or a group of still other men. The last word of all friendship, however, is Callicles's own silence, the mute, self-disciplined violation of each other which enacts, in the image of Callicles himself, the truth of the world that mind succumbs to the divisive onslaught of blind, silent matter.

Thus, as Callicles and Socrates stand facing each other, Callicles silent, Socrates declaring the truth of friendship, each is accusing the other of having "turned human life completely upside down" (481b); each is the spiritual appeal to the other to awaken from dream and come alive in genuinely human at-

tunement to the real world. Moreover, as Plato's image of the puppets suggests, this issue between Socrates and Callicles is the issue of every man. Each of us may experience the issue in that moment of confrontation with the other man when we stand at once in the centripetal current which would absorb him into ourselves without remainder and the centrifugal current which would sweep us toward him in friendship. In this moment we know the opposed Calliclesian and Socratic tensions of our own soul and have ourselves as actors in the drama of war and peace.

But perhaps—and I suggest this last point with hesitation because Socrates seems so confident of his "arguments of adamant and steel" (509)—perhaps Plato has packed into this incident in the *Gorgias* the still deeper meaning that in fact Socrates does not know with certainty that he, not Callicles, represents human nature. For Callicles's silence occurs against the background of Socrates's earlier remark, made at the beginning of their conversation, that Callicles will be his touchstone, that if Socrates can bring Callicles to agree with him then Socrates will know that his own soul is golden (486e). Against this background Callicles's silence may represent the counter-wisdom which Socrates fails to break, a failure which exposes Plato's awareness of the crisis of faith which lies at the core of his philosophy. Though Socrates-Plato's wisdom rests firmly upon his own experiential self-knowledge of the hierarchical order of rank of the powers of his own soul (his conscience), it remains ultimately an act of faith made in the face of the opposite possibility attested by Callicles-Plato in his silence. After all, all knowledge waits upon confirmation from the other's point of view, and this is especially the case for philosophy which seeks that wisdom about the whole which includes the phenomena of human valuation itself. Here the testimony of the other is especially crucial. What a man alone sees he must doubt; he approaches certainty only if others can see it too. Thus, only in dialogue can there be established the nature of man as our clue to the nature of the universe, and in this

dialogue Calliclesian silence, whether it stares back at one from the other or surfaces in one's own soul, has a say. Hence the power of Socrates's confrontation with Callicles's silence at *Gorgias* 506c: the two opposed tugs in every man's soul offset each other, generating every man's deepest question; Socrates is present as Plato's answer to this question, but this answer requires a confirmation it does not receive. The reader must himself enter into the dialogue about the nature of man.

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