

## **The question of temperance and hedonism in Callicles**

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ABSTRACT: Callicles, Socrates' main interlocutor in Plato's *Gorgias*, has traditionally been interpreted as a kind of sybaritic hedonist, as someone who takes the ultimate goal in life to consist in the pursuit of physical pleasures and, further, as someone who refuses to accept the value of any restraint at all on a person's desire. Such an interpretation turns Callicles into a straw man and Plato, I argue, did not create Callicles only to have him knocked down in this easy way. Plato's construction of Callicles' position is much more formidable and not reducible to any simple classification. In the first part of this paper, I challenge the traditional interpretation of Callicles. In the second, I speculate as to why Plato has attributed this much more formidable position to Callicles, one which Socrates is never really made to get at the heart of.

### (1)

Callicles holds a desire-fulfilment conception of happiness; it is something like the continual satisfaction of desires that constitutes happiness for him. He claims that leading the happy life consists in having many desires, letting them grow as strong as possible and then being able to satisfy them (491e-492a). For Callicles, this life of maximum pursuit of desires consists in a kind of absolute freedom, where there is very little practice of restraint; happiness, he says, consists of luxury, unrestraint and freedom (492b-c). For instance, when Socrates asks Callicles whether he takes an individual 'ruling himself' to mean being temperate and self-mastering over the pleasures and desires in oneself (491d), Callicles responds by mocking such a view; self-control or self-mastery is for stupid people,<sup>1</sup> he says. He goes on to state that a man cannot be happy if he is enslaved to anyone at all, including himself (491e).

Now, many commentators view Callicles' rather vitriolic repudiation of temperance and self-mastery as a kind of proclamation of the indiscriminate unleashing of one's desires, or, in effect, as a rejection of temperance *simpliciter*.<sup>2</sup> Such a view, I believe, gets wrong what Callicles really means by his repudiation. What he really intends by his harsh claim is only made clear by considering the more general contrast Plato has constructed between him and Socrates, namely, that of two very different ways of life: that of the many, including the philosopher,

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, 'idle' or 'simple-minded' people is probably closer to the mark. For more on this translation see p.11 below.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Irwin 1977, 120, thinks that in calling temperate people 'fools', Callicles is rejecting temperance *simpliciter*; White 1985, 140, commenting on that same passage, claims that Callicles 'officially rejects any and all forms of temperance...'; Berman 1991, 122-3, says Callicles' thesis is that 'temperance is incompatible with happiness', 'that it is very important with respect to Callicles' happiness that he not be restrained, i.e. temperate'.

and their adherence to the popular virtue of temperance,<sup>3</sup> and that of the politician or rhetorician with his typically ambitious life fuelled by power and freedom.

(2)

Before I attempt to pull such a contrast out from the passages mentioned above and look for the correct way to understand Callicles' vicious denial of temperance and self-mastery, it is perhaps best to first spend some time on those particular passages in the text itself which are commonly taken as evidence of Callicles as someone who refuses to accept the value of any restraint at all on a person's desire.

An often quoted passage begins at 495a. There, Socrates and Callicles have the following exchange:

SOCRATES: Could you tell me once and for all whether in your opinion the pleasant and the good are the same, or whether there's even one pleasure which isn't good?

CALLICLES: I can't say they're different and still be consistent, so I'll say they're the same.

By asserting that the good and the pleasant are the same, Callicles is taken to be failing to distinguish good pleasures from bad, thereby imputing to himself a seemingly unrestricted hedonism—the view that whatever is pleasant is good and that the goodness of anything is to be judged exclusively in terms of its pleasure-producing capacity. If this is right, it would appear to support the popular view that Callicles does indeed hold to a conception of the good life which can be reduced to the experience of any particular pleasure without qualification.

But it is plainly this popular tag of Callicles as an indiscriminate hedonist which is misleading. Socrates, by inducing him to admit to the happy life of the itch-scratcher (494c-d)<sup>4</sup> and to the subsequent identification of the good and the pleasant, has clearly parodied Callicles' position beyond recognition. Not only does Callicles assent to this identification *only* in order to avoid being inconsistent within Socrates' rules of discussion, and not only does he finally categorically state that some pleasures are better than others (499b6) and that pleasant things should be done for the sake of good things and not the other way around (500a), but—and this is the central point—Callicles' position from the very start, and throughout, is noticeably a much larger and vaguer one about superior natures who are wise about public affairs and courageous and powerful enough to attain their grand ends. Indeed, just prior to his spurious identification at 495a, Callicles

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, the many may not all actually live according to the popular conception of temperance. However, Plato does exploit something that was in the air at the time, namely, what was perceived to be the more popular and traditional conception of temperance involving self-rule and self-restraint, defended by Socrates in this dialogue, and the scorn of temperance understood in this way, born from a certain type of sophistic education and represented by the politician Callicles.

<sup>4</sup> The idea is that if pleasure is identified with the good in the way just explained, there can be placed no restrictions on the kinds of pleasures one may want to enjoy in order to be happy. Socrates uses the example of someone who has an itch and lives happily by scratching it to his heart's content his whole life.

makes it fairly clear to Socrates that he finds some kinds of desires repugnant (494e)—something he would not do if he failed to distinguish good from bad pleasures, or upheld desire-satisfaction as such as his highest value.

In any case, the point here is that the bulk of what Callicles says is far from suggestive of any sort of indiscriminate hedonism. His position should not be allowed to become trivialized and misrepresented due to a few unfortunate (though clearly insincere) admissions. Besides, it would seem that there is important literary or dramatic justification for such an interpretation. Callicles is clearly one of Plato's greatest character achievements. Dramatically considered, he is perhaps the most highly developed and finely wrought interlocutor in all of the Platonic corpus short of Socrates. It would seem very strange for Plato to have spent so much time on him—more than half the dialogue, in fact—only to have Socrates turn him into a straw man. After all, Plato has Socrates mention several times that Callicles is a formidable interlocutor who is not lacking in the same qualities as the others, Gorgias and Polus; he says, without heavy irony it seems,<sup>5</sup> that Callicles is knowledgeable, good-willed, frank and well-educated (487a-488a).<sup>6</sup> It is abundantly clear from the larger context that Plato is using Callicles as a type: he is a conventionally educated young Athenian aristocrat who stands as a spokesman for, or embodiment of, a kind of full-throttle desire-satisfaction outlook; an outlook prevalent at the time and more fully expressed perhaps by the life of the grand orator (and the associated moral and political attitudes exemplified by a certain breed of *phusis*-sophism).<sup>7</sup> Plato's real concern, as he makes Socrates state clearly at 500c-d, is to argue for the life of philosophy over the life of the politician or rhetorician.<sup>8</sup> The fact that Callicles is made to assent to a few propositions which he does not hold, and which completely and noticeably misrepresent his real, much grander (and more threatening) position, hardly seems to prove effective in this regard. Therefore it seems to me that there are other, more reasonable ways to understand why it is Plato makes Callicles admit to these propositions. Perhaps he wishes to signal a kind of dialectical ineptitude on the part of this rhetorician, or perhaps to shame a powerful man who boasted that he could never be shamed (487d). These all go some small way in getting his audience to cast doubt on the merits of this sort of person and this sort of life. That the Calliclean individual is forced into a position of a compulsive scratcher does not.

<sup>5</sup> See Plochmann and Robinson 1988, 106 n.3.

<sup>6</sup> He is evidently well-read in literature and history. For instance, at 484b he quotes Pindar rather fittingly, at 484e Euripides, at 485d Homer, and he seems familiar with the careers of several Athenians of the historic past (503c).

<sup>7</sup> We might see some indication of this type reflected in Callicles' associates. Early on in their discussion (487c), Socrates mentions the names of three individuals he knows Callicles spends time with: Teisander of Aphidnae, Andron the son of Androtion and Nausicydes of Cholargeis. We know most about Andron. He was a member of the oligarchic regime, the Four Hundred, and an associate of the sophist Hippias, someone else who championed *phusis* over *nomos* (see Irwin 1979, on 487c). In general, the evidence seems to suggest that this was a wealthy, ambitious group of young men who belonged to the Athenian aristocratic class and who had 'acquired just enough of the "new learning" to rid them of inconvenient moral scruples' (Dodds 1959, on 487c3).

<sup>8</sup> Callicles discredits sophists as 'worthless' (520a1), but is interested in rhetoric, though primarily for the sake of his own career in political life.

Another (earlier) bit of text which is very often taken as evidence of Callicles as someone who refuses to accept the value of any restraint at all on a person's desire is 491e-492a. Let us take a look at this passage, where White, among others, takes Callicles to be making it 'abundantly clear that he rejects any and all restrictions that a person might place on the satisfaction of his desires at any time'.<sup>9</sup>

Rather, this is what's admirable and just by nature—and I'll say it to you now with all frankness—that the man who'll live correctly ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible, he ought to be competent to devote himself to them by virtue of his bravery and intelligence, and to fill them with whatever he may have an appetite for at the time.

Perhaps at a quick glance this may look like someone endorsing a policy of fully indiscriminate, uncapped desires, but I think that a closer examination actually admits nothing of the kind. First and foremost, considered purely in and of itself, this passage simply does *not* say that *all* desires should go unrestrained (nor, therefore, that there should be no discrimination amongst them in terms of their gratification). All that is said here is merely that this (Calliclean) man should let his desires grow as large as possible. We might take it as implied that in order to actually achieve this, i.e. in order for some growth to be possible, this man would have to defer gratification to some desires that get in the way of the maximum growth of other (presumably these bigger, more extravagant) desires. In other words, it seems to be *built right into* this idea of bringing desires to their strongest possible state that not every conceivable desire is to be given free rein.<sup>10</sup> And nothing in this passage suggests that something like this is not the case. Nothing from what is admitted here is incompatible with this man restraining some of his appetites so that a large variety of his strong desires (doubtless those for power, fame and wealth) can be satisfied most effectively at their peak.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, we might see this as manifesting itself in Callicles' own political career; when he's speaking in the assembly, for instance, he has to rein in certain desires and adapt himself to what the audience wants to hear (500e-503a).

Moreover, progressing outside of this passage, we should notice that Socrates does not go on to suggest *anything to the effect* that Callicles needs to think about or have the ability to hold back from satisfying some desires in order to satisfy these other greater ones, something which we would clearly expect him to do *if* the latter held to a policy of outright indiscriminate satisfaction.

A second point to notice about this passage is that it looks very much like someone taking his stand upon a certain view of *idealized or selected* desires. The Calliclean appears to reject the desires advocated by the many in favour of those *he* himself chooses to satisfy. This is suggestive of the fact that the desires spoken of, that is, those which should be allowed to grow as large as possible, belong, not

<sup>9</sup> White 1985, 141. For an opposing view on this passage see Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 100.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle *NE* 1.8, 1099a12, appears to give warning against something like this. He points out that sources of pleasure may *conflict* with one another—e.g. overeating due to an excessive desire for food may interfere with (in Calliclean terms, building up maximum desire for) other pleasures down the road.

<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to discussion with Panos Dimas for a fuller awareness of this last point.

just to anyone, but to the ‘man who is to live correctly’<sup>12</sup>—in other words, to the Calliclean individual. They are *his* (ἐαυτοῦ) desires and he must have the power to serve *these* (ταύταις). Thus construed in this way, it seems to be not *all* desires which are being spoken of, but only those idealized ones belonging to the strong individual. If this is right, it would be indicative of what we might see as Callicles’ overall moral independence. That is, rather than living as the many dictate, the Calliclean does as he pleases or directs himself on his own grounds, and recognizes no values or principles as superior to those he chooses to follow. In fact, this appeal to autonomy and selected desires can be seen as forming part of the continuity of the rhetorician’s ideal individual *throughout* the *Gorgias* dialogue. For instance, according to Polus, the tyrant’s power is desirable because it permits him to do whatever *he thinks fit* in the city (467a2).<sup>13</sup>

### (3)

It is important at this point to say something more about Callicles’ view on pleasure and hedonism. Callicles has traditionally been interpreted as a kind of sybaritic hedonist, as someone who takes the ultimate goal in life to consist in the pursuit of physical pleasures. Commentators in this tradition tend to see his alleged intemperance as a product of his sybariticism. The insatiability and excessive character of those desires associated with sybariticism, it is argued, undermines a life of reason: it causes one to be indifferent to considerations of any longer-term interest.<sup>14</sup> Callicles has also (as mentioned briefly before) been interpreted as promoting a form of present-moment hedonism, a view that is also, not surprisingly, taken to underlie his rejection of temperance altogether. I would like to call into question both his sybariticism and his adherence to present-moment hedonism (indeed, as it turns out, to any denomination of hedonism). Let me begin with his view on pleasure.

The first thing we should notice is that it is Socrates who, through his sieve-myths (492e-494a), paints a picture of Callicles’ conception of pleasures as merely physical. But this is something Callicles clearly notices and *corrects*: he

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<sup>12</sup> This reference to ‘living correctly’ (ὀρθῶς βιωσόμενον) clearly signifies ‘natural justice’ according to Callicles (see 483b-484c for the numerous connections Callicles makes between the better man or the right way of life and natural justice). It could be that the strong man’s desires are conditioned in some way by his judgment, whereby his judgment *is part of* his ‘nature’. In this sense, when Callicles, in this passage, connects the satisfaction of desires with ‘living rightly’, i.e. Calliclean nature, he might be seen to be presupposing that these desires are reflected on and evaluated *before* they are indulged (see Johnson 2005, 111).

<sup>13</sup> Unlike Polus perhaps, Callicles’ power may take the form, not of tyranny, but of the exercise of leadership in the democracy (he is said to be a ‘lover of the Athenian people’: 481d, 513b). If so, we might wonder to what extent Callicles’ self-direction and moral independence may be compromised by his pursuit of a political career in democratic Athens. While it is clear he regards the majority of the human race as weak (483b) and scorns their ideals, Callicles, at the same time, has to win the approval of the masses, to continually adapt himself to what they want to hear (481d-e), which includes, it would seem, accepting conventional morality.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle seems to warn against something like this. At *NE* 3.12, 1119b7-11, he says that the desire for the pleasant or indulgent pleasures (he mentions pleasures of the child) is insatiable and indiscriminate, and that if it gets strong enough it knocks out the capacity for rational calculation and trumps long-term goals or considerations.

replies that he is interested in fulfilling *all sorts of desires* (494c), suggesting strongly that his construal of desire and gratification is not limited to the bodily. In fact, even before Socrates' introduction of the myths, Callicles tries to steer Socrates away from talk of the bodily desires for food and drink, claiming that he's not interested in such things and that such references miss the point altogether (490c-d). Furthermore, earlier on in the *Gorgias*, midway through Socrates' conversation with Gorgias, Callicles claims that he has attended many 'philosophical discussions' but none gives him as much pleasure or delight<sup>15</sup> as the present one he is witnessing between the two of them (458d1-3); in fact, it appears that Callicles has arranged the entire occasion of the day in the first place (447b). This is clearly not any sort of physical pleasure.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, at 484d, Callicles says that the weak-natured are *inexperienced* in human pleasures and desires. What this ought to suggest to us is that, as opposed to the many's paltry and limited pleasures, Callicles—someone who considers himself to be a breed apart from the rest—pursues grand and cultivated pleasures. Implicit here are surely pleasures produced by rhetoric, pleasures resulting from intellectual debates and so on—the sorts of pleasures the weak-natured do not have access to or the ability to pursue at all. This is also an indication that Callicles is not only interested in physical pleasures. I take it then that it is best to view him as someone who holds to a quite open and flexible account of pleasure, one compatible with a wide field of pleasant experiences and psychological states.

It remains to be asked whether or not Callicles adheres to some denomination of hedonism. Several commentators take him to be espousing a kind of indiscriminate or instant-gratification hedonism. Both White (1985) and Berman (1991), for instance, reject the notion that Callicles holds to any sort of long-term planning and so also reject that he distinguishes between pleasure that will later result in pain and so to be therefore avoided. What Callicles is espousing, they claim, is a view which says we ought to satisfy the desires that we have *now*. Are they right? There are several reasons to think they are not. First of all, as I have already tried to argue, Callicles clearly does not believe that the good and the pleasant are the same—a view which could be seen to license any and all restraint of a person's desires, but a statement he regrets making and one he tries to rescind many times. Furthermore, when we consider the kind of person he is and look closely at what he says, it is difficult not to see him as committed to an overall view involving calculations about which desires to renounce or put off for the sake of an anticipated overall greater life of satisfaction. Callicles is a practising orator or politician (481d), with big ambitions, who is adamant about seeing them through (his courage will minister to this) (491b), and who endorses as good 'a life as long as possible' (511b8-9). His desires then extend quite far into the future, at least to the extent required by a concern for the career and accomplishments of these sorts of professions. Moreover, at 517c2-519a3, he acknowledges the pleasures to be had by people in being supplied by the administrators of the city with ships, walls and harbors. These sorts of

<sup>15</sup> 'So if you're willing to discuss, even if it's all day long, you'll be gratifying me (χαριεῖσθε).'

<sup>16</sup> Callicles also consents to pleasures of flattery to the soul (501b1-c6). See Rudebusch 1999, 36-37, for further instances of non-bodily appetites in Callicles.

satisfactions clearly imply desires for projects whose fulfillment extends over a longer elapse of time than an immediate present. This ought to be enough to suggest to us that Callicles is no indiscriminate or present-moment hedonist.

Perhaps then Callicles adheres to some kind of prudential or long-term hedonism. A prudential hedonist is concerned with maximizing pleasures over the course of his life and will occasionally go for things he does not like if he believes that this will give him more pleasure in the long run. Such a position could be made consistent with Callicles' claim that some pleasures are better than others (499b6-8), if he means to reduce the distinction between good and bad pleasures to a distinction between more or less overall pleasure. But before we consider this possibility, I need to first say something more about Callicles' conception of pleasure.

Through his sieve-myths (especially 493e-494a), Socrates tries to get Callicles to see the aspect of pain, distress or physical hardship generally thought to accompany his continually-inflowing, insatiable life. After all, Socrates does presume that the life of the intemperate man in the myth, he who tries to keep his leaky jars full, is one which requires constant work, day and night—a sort of Sisyphean existence. Now, Callicles clearly appears indifferent to this element of pain or distress Socrates is appealing to. And understandably so, since this is something he himself has *already clearly recognized and accepted* as part and parcel of his conception of the happy life. Callicles never says anywhere the happy man is he who experiences pleasures and *no pains*; rather, he knows very well that his objective of 'having as much as possible flowing in' demands a requisite amount of accompanying pain or distress. In fact, he explicitly acknowledges this when he tells Socrates (quoted earlier) that when one has 'been filled up and experiences neither joy *nor pain* (*λυπούμενον*), that's living like a stone...' (494b, italics added). We might see Callicles here as identifying pleasure with satisfaction and pain with desire or need, since filled up, a man experiences *neither* pleasure nor pain (see also 496d). At the conceptual level of desire-satisfaction then, according to Callicles, the prospect of pleasure looks to be intimately connected to the experience of pain.<sup>17</sup> Mirrored on a large scale, that is, applied to life as a whole, what Callicles appears to be saying is that if one does not live like a stone, but instead, like himself, opts for a life full of desires, then, within that life, one cannot have pleasure without pain.

Interestingly, although Callicles holds a desire-satisfaction conception of pleasure, where he seems to identify pain with need or lack and pleasure with satisfaction, he shows absolutely *no concern* about the admixture of pain affecting the net hedonic magnitude of the pleasure overall.<sup>18</sup> Of course, one need not be

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<sup>17</sup> Socrates, in fact, conceives of pleasure in just this way, that is, as remedial, as assuaging a pain, or the filling (*πλήρωσει*) of a lack, in the first of three arguments he presents to Callicles starting at 496c. Callicles agrees fully with Socrates' conception there—a further indication he himself holds to this view of pleasure. Note that although the examples used here are bodily, this scheme may be applied to pleasures of the soul as well (496e7-8). See also 496e5 (*λυπούμενον χείρειν*).

<sup>18</sup> The thought is that Callicles has to maximize the pain or distress which the pleasure is to remedy. In other words, his choice for the most intense pleasure entails an acceptance of the most intense distress, since the intensity of pleasure is proportional to the magnitude of the lack that is

sensitive to the antecedent pain of each *particular* desire in order to be a hedonist concerned with maximizing pleasure considered over one's life as a whole. But even here, that is, at the more long-term level, Callicles—against another popular interpretation of him<sup>19</sup>—never says anywhere that his conception of happiness is that the more pleasures a man experiences and *the fewer pains*, the happier he is. Callicles, that is, never indicates that he is in any way concerned with keeping down the pains in proportion to the pleasures.

Moreover, if he were some kind of maximizing hedonist we might perhaps expect him to say something similar to what the Athenian says in the *Laws* about matters of choice. There, in a description of a life closely resembling Callicles', the Athenian says that when faced with a choice of two situations, both in which pleasures and pains come frequently and with great intensity, one must weigh them and choose the one, however little it may be, with pleasure predominating (733c). Yet, again, Callicles never talks like this.

Now of course nothing here is incompatible with Callicles holding a hedonist position. Certainly the presence of pains, or a large quantity of them, or the accumulation of great, severe pains, are all consistent with a maximizing hedonism provided that the intent is for an overall surplus of pleasure over pain. However, the only point here is that this sort of pleasure-maximizing is never made explicit by Callicles;<sup>20</sup> there is no sign of any attention being paid to Bentham-like variables such as the intensity and duration of pleasures nor is there anything suggesting a maximizing model's usual accompanying weighing and measuring (features Plato is well aware of and has expressed elsewhere—see *Protagoras* 356b-357b). And this, combined with the possibility that the happy life for him may be one which comes somewhat close to having roughly the same proportion of pain as pleasure, might suggest to us that is not pleasure *per se*, but something much broader and vaguer that stands as the ultimate ideal for Callicles—an ideal, that is, which takes as its primary end the cultivation of a life in which there is a certain succession of large wants and satisfactions, those singled out as worth pursuing by the superior individual. Indeed, to my awareness, Callicles never really specifies the end he is after; the closest he comes, it seems, is early on in the discussion when he enjoins Socrates to 'have life (βίος) and renown (δόξα) and many other good things (πολλὰ ἀγαθὰ) as well' (486d1). We might think that if Callicles were a hedonist, he would have been made to give greater specification of his end than he in fact does.<sup>21</sup>

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being replenished. The more pleasure a proposed hedonist like Callicles wants, the more he will have to endure distress.

<sup>19</sup> Santas' description is representative of this interpretation: '[Callicles'] conception of happiness is that the happy man is he who experiences pleasures and no pains, and that the more pleasures a man experiences and the more intensely and frequently he experiences them, and the fewer pains, the happier he is' (1979, 257).

<sup>20</sup> Again, Cooper 1999, Chap. 2, notices the same thing: '... Callicles' ideal was never to maximize pleasure or the gratification of appetite...' (71); see also his footnote 41.

<sup>21</sup> Nichols 1988, 133, thinks that seeking pleasure is not what Callicles really aims at in his life, but that he is drawn to 'nobler and more demanding goals' that he is unable to articulate.



## (4)

Thus far I have tried to argue that those passages which are typically taken as evidence for Callicles' rejection of temperance fail to commit him to that view. I have also tried to show that Callicles is no hedonist; if I am right about this, then his rejection of temperance is not grounded in any acceptance of hedonism. What then is the correct way to understand Callicles' seemingly vicious denial of temperance and self-mastery? I now turn to a more positive and constructive interpretation for an answer to this question.

Some important clues, I think, are provided for us in Socrates' elucidation to Callicles at 491d-e. In response to Callicles' question about what this 'ruling himself' is supposed to mean, Socrates explains: 'Nothing very subtle. Just what the many mean: being self-controlled and master of oneself, ruling the pleasures and appetites within oneself.' We might first note Plato's coupling of temperance (*sophrosyne*) and self-mastery (*enkrateia*) indicating that he takes them as carrying little difference in meaning.<sup>22</sup> This is significant. The tie-in here of the latter with the former signals to us a conception of temperance as a kind of restraint<sup>23</sup> or even near *abstinence* of desire or appetite. It seems clear Plato has something like this in mind since only a little later, following Callicles' rant on the happy life as one consisting largely of luxury, he makes Socrates respond somewhat rhetorically: 'So then those who have *no need of anything* are wrongly said to be happy?' (492e3-4, italics added). As Helen North points out in her ambitious book *Sophrosyne*,<sup>24</sup> this particular definition of temperance, i.e. as a kind of restraint or abstinence<sup>25</sup> from desires and pleasures, had become the common view by the late fifth century (70).<sup>26</sup> We no doubt see a sign of this commonality by Socrates' description of it in the above passage as 'nothing complicated' and being 'just as the many say'. We might see a further sign of this immediately after at 491e3-4, when in response to Callicles' comment that he (Socrates) must mean the temperate to be silly people, Socrates responds: 'How so? There is *no one* who'd fail to recognize that I mean no such thing.'

<sup>22</sup> Plato also couples them together at *Rep.* 4, 430e; Xenophon does the same at *Cyr.* 8.1.30.

<sup>23</sup> *Enkrateia* (self-mastery) clearly has connotations of struggle, resistance, restraint, etc. Notice Socrates' later connection of *restraining* desires with a kind of *curtailing* (*kolazein*) (505b7). Aristotle gives a more precise formulation of *enkrateia* by pairing it with resistance or endurance (*karterikon*) and delineating it from *sophrosyne* (*NE* 7.1, 1145b14-17). This is all indicative of the common perception of the power or force of certain desires and pleasures.

<sup>24</sup> North 1966.

<sup>25</sup> North points to Euripides and the sophistic movement as initiators of such a conception (69-70). She also connects the idea of purity (*hagnotes*) and purification (*katharsis*) in the Pythagoreans and in Orphism to the development of *sophrosyne* as a form of abstinence. It is Plato, she argues, that makes greatest use of these elements in moulding his conception of *sophrosyne*, of which is perhaps suggested by the sieve metaphor in the *Gorgias* (North 1966, 30-1). Incidentally, a remarkably similar connection can be seen in Xenophon's *wording* as well: Socrates (in the *Memorabilia*), when recounting Prodicus' fable, depicts Virtue—who stands opposed to Vice's life of free-reign desires—as having limbs adorned with purity (*katharotes*), eyes with modesty (*aidos*), and a figure that is sober (*sophrosyne*) (2.1.22).

<sup>26</sup> Perhaps a further indication of this is to be seen in Aristotle, who seems at times to be *correcting* the current view that *sophrosyne* is to be defined as a kind of abstinence of pleasure (see *NE* 2.7, 1107b6-7; 3.11, 1119a5-20; 7.12, 1153a27-35).

Moreover, following Dodds,<sup>27</sup> the ‘wrongly said’ in the subsequent 492e3 would seem to suggest that this particular desire-restricted or ascetic account of happiness was rather prevalent and not peculiar to Socrates. Both Xenophon and the Cynics, for instance, conceive of temperance in a similar way, i.e. as involving restraint or abstinence. The latter posit extravagance as the antithesis to temperance and personify temperance as the mother of frugality.<sup>28</sup> In his *Agesilaus*, Xenophon clearly treats self-mastery as a subhead of temperance when, in speaking of Agesilaus’ difficult but successful restraint of his desires (*enkrateia*) for the beautiful Megabates, calls them acts of supreme temperance (*sophrosyne*) (5.4). The more ascetic aspect of self-mastery is brought out in his *Memorabilia* where Xenophon says that Socrates was, ‘the most self-controlled of all men over sex and bodily appetite... and so trained for needing moderate amounts that he was easily satisfied when he had only little’ (1.2.1).<sup>29</sup>

Now, amidst the popularity of this view, North calls attention to the fact that there was a backlash in the fifth century which condemned *sophrosyne* as the spoilsport of good living; it became a virtue poked fun at and rejected because its practice was seen as interfering with the satisfaction of passion and desire.<sup>30</sup> This emphasis on abstinence, chastity or limitation of appetite, for instance, is subject to prolonged ridicule by the Unjust Argument in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (1071-74) where it is alleged that *to sophronein* deprives (*sterethein*) a man of all the delights of love, gaming, drinking, eating—in short, of all that makes life worth living. In fact, we may note a consensus of this backlash in the *Gorgias* text itself: at 492d Socrates says to his interlocutor that he (Callicles) expresses what *everyone else thinks*<sup>31</sup> but dares not say.

It is exactly in the spirit of this backlash that I suggest we see Callicles’ forceful repudiation of temperance. On this interpretation, Callicles is not propounding the indiscriminate unleashing of one’s desires or rejecting temperance *simpliciter*, but he is only rejecting the so-called ‘unnatural’ view of temperance embodied in conventional morality.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, if we go back to where talk of self-ruling and being ‘master of oneself’ is introduced by Socrates, we might see that Callicles’ immediate response to him reveals something like this. Callicles replies both ironically and sympathetically: ‘How delightful (*hedus*) you

<sup>27</sup> Dodds 1959, on 492e3.

<sup>28</sup> For further discussion and examples in the ancient literature of temperance as a form of restraint, see North 1966, 133-4.

<sup>29</sup> For more on Socrates’ asceticism in Xenophon, see, e.g. *Mem.* 1.6. Note, interestingly, the similarity between what Socrates says there at 1.6.10 (‘You seem, Antiphon, to imagine that happiness consists in luxury and extravagance. But my belief is that to have no wants is divine...’) and our aforementioned passage 492e in Plato’s *Gorgias*.

<sup>30</sup> For more on this see North 1966, 70, and 1947, 9-11.

<sup>31</sup> ‘The others’ may refer to a certain segment of the population or it may refer to those present in the discussion, namely, Gorgias, Polus and Chaerephon (and perhaps to those belonging to the auditory of the lecture which Gorgias had earlier finished, 455c). It seems to me that the former is more likely the proper referent here since the latter do not *secretly* harbour such desires, but rather, as exemplified by Polus (e.g. 473c-d), they express them openly. I thank Håvard Løkke for bringing this discrepancy to my attention.

<sup>32</sup> Klosko 1984, explores a similar position, though it is not one he thinks can be consistently attributed to Callicles.

are!’ (491e). *Hedus* in this context corresponds best to our *naïve*, which is made clearer by Callicles’ ensuing reference to those *simple-minded* ones. What this seems to indicate is not that Callicles is rejecting temperance *simpliciter* but only the temperance of conventional or so-called ‘simpleton’ morality.<sup>33</sup> And, in fact, if we pay close attention to Callicles’ subsequent more detailed response to Socrates’ question, we see that when he actually picks up the language of ‘master of oneself’, and of course rebukes it, he explicitly takes it to mean the enslavement of the *law of the many* on oneself. He wonders why he who is free to enjoy good things without interference should reasonably ‘bring as master upon themselves the law of the many...?’ (492b7)

We may then have good reason to take as the proper target of Callicles’ denial of self-mastery, not temperance *tout court*, but only that naïve, spoilsport aspect of it represented by popular convention. Callicles, that is, is snubbing the *kind of life* that is suggested by this popular temperance. His indignation is directed at the anaemic state of existence he thinks is produced, or perhaps more accurately, self-inflicted, by adherents of this virtue, i.e. he thinks this so-called ‘virtue’ is merely a symptom of the sickness of its convention-bound inventors.

As we have seen, this vehemence at the anaemic life is more or less implied in his initial response to Socrates and indeed throughout much of the discussion, but it is made especially apparent in two particular passages. First, when Socrates asks if it’s wrong to say that those who need nothing are happy, Callicles responds: ‘Yes, for in that case stones and corpses would be happiest’ (492e). There is no reason to take this reply merely as a kind of shock sarcasm. Callicles is serious about likening these people to dead and inanimate objects; he really thinks they stand at the extreme opposite end to those living the full and rich experiential life. He substantiates this a little later on when he says that those who live like stones, once they fill up, experience *no more* enjoyment *or* distress (494b: an important passage I will return to).<sup>34</sup>

The second passage comes early on in their discussion. Though this time his argument is not explicitly headed under the issue of temperance, but rather philosophy, Callicles’ obsession is again clearly on the kinds of sacrifices the philosopher makes in regards to the broad range of life experiences one can have. He states:

For even if one is naturally well favoured but engages in philosophy far beyond that appropriate time of life, he can’t help but turn out to be inexperienced in everything a man who’s to be admirable and good and well thought of is supposed to be experienced in. Such people turn out to be inexperienced in the laws of their city or business, whether in public or private, inexperienced also in human pleasures and desires...<sup>35</sup>

And, foreshadowing his reference to stones and corpses, he concludes:

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Thrasymachus regards justice as naïveté, as a ‘genteel simplicity’ (*Rep.* 1, 348c).

<sup>34</sup> The mention of *λοπούμενον* is interesting, indicating perhaps that it is the very wide spectrum of human experience Callicles is concerned with, not, as is usually thought, merely with pleasure.

<sup>35</sup> To my reading, this last clause seems clearly to be an insinuation at idealized or selected desires. See pp.4-5 above.

... in short, inexperienced in the ways of human beings altogether. (484c-d)<sup>36</sup>

Thus the gist of my claim here should be clear by now. What *really* seems to bother Callicles is not desire-restraint *per se*, but the spoiler-role popular temperance plays on the (according to him) good and full human life. This is not to deny that he repudiates the general restraining of desires—for he certainly does—but only that this repudiation comes *via* his conception of what makes for a good life and what makes for a bad one. It is important here to recall the latent backlash towards popular temperance given explicit expression in the voice of Aristophanes' Unjust Argument. The Unjust Argument says nothing in his speech to the effect that people wish to satisfy *all* their desires. Instead, people simply want more of what satisfies their *everyday* desires—in this case, evidently, more opportunities for sexual love, drink and food.<sup>37</sup> In other words, this opposition to popular temperance, as exemplified by the Unjust Argument—a backlash to which I have suggested Callicles belongs—is not championing the satisfaction of every conceivable desire with absolutely no regard for restraint; rather, and much less exaggerated, its concern is with reclaiming the commonly regarded good things in life and with the sort of power necessary for bringing this about. When Callicles proclaims therefore that most people lead anaemic lives because they restrain many of their desires, we should not see this as an across-the-board call for the abolition of any and all such restraint.<sup>38</sup> An endorsement, on his part, of some amount of prudential self-restraint, is clearly not incompatible with his reasons for the repudiation of popular temperance.

There is etymological adjunct to this. To reject the popular *sophrosyne* of the fifth century is not necessarily to reject this virtue *in toto* (and hence the restraint of desires). *Sophrosyne* for the Greeks was a many-sided term, part of which included a long history of being associated with prudence, calculation, cleverness or intelligence in one's interests<sup>39</sup>—something which, though it may at times betray a certain licentiousness, clearly *need not* suggest the complete abandonment of restraint on desires. That is to say, since *sophrosyne* was associated both with intelligence in the agent's interest and with commonly accepted moderation, someone who rejected this moderation may or *may not* have rejected temperance too, depending on whichever facet of temperance he concentrated on. Plato himself obviously recognizes this tradition. For instance, in

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<sup>36</sup> This intimation of philosophers as experientially impoverished and so practically dead was fairly widespread. Note, for example, Simmias' popular description of philosophers in the *Phaedo*: 'I think that the majority... and our people in Thebes would thoroughly agree that philosophers are *nearly dead* and that the majority of men is well aware that they deserve to be' (64b, italics added); and Strepsiades, in Aristophanes *Clouds*, is afraid of succumbing to Socrates' teachings for fear of becoming a zombie, *hemithnes* (504). In fact, Socrates later enjoins Callicles 'not to be attached to life' (512e).

<sup>37</sup> Klosko 1984, 134, in defending a similar claim, points out the aspirations of ordinary men given by Glaucon in *Republic* 2. The happiness that the power of Gyges confers consists in giving its holder more of the good things in life, those commonly regarded things as money, honor, sex, etc.—but Glaucon does not say anything about people wishing to satisfy every single desire possible.

<sup>38</sup> As Rudebusch 1999, 35, puts it, Callicles is not making an 'omni-satisfactory claim' about desire-satisfaction.

<sup>39</sup> North 1966.

the *Phaedo*, he speaks of those, who in practicing a kind of *sophrosyne*, are actually *self-restrained* by reason of a kind of licentiousness (ἀκολασία τινὶ σώφρονες, 68e). It makes sense to see the Unjust Argument and perhaps Callicles as representative of this more prudential aspect of *sophrosyne*.<sup>40</sup>

So does this, contrary to popular interpretation, perhaps leave Callicles with *some sort of* conception of temperance? I think it probably does. Of course, insofar as the many understand temperance to entail a specific mode of living, Callicles indubitably rejects it—as we have seen, his vitriolic reaction to Socrates' question at 491d-e attests to this. And it is true that nowhere does Callicles explicitly lay claim to a position on temperance. He does however point out the similarity between conventional temperance and conventional justice (492a-b)—and given that he opposes conventional justice with a view of natural justice (483b-484b), so we might think he means to oppose conventional temperance with a view of natural temperance, with a view of temperance, that is, disembodied from conventional morality—a view perhaps not too far from the egoistic calculating aspect of *sophrosyne* borne out of the many-sided use of the term.<sup>41</sup>

At some base level, it seems any conception of temperance would have to entail at least two things: 1) that certain desires must be restricted, and 2) a recognition of which these are, and which other desires should be allowed to (grow and) be satisfied. And, as I have attempted to show, it would not be unreasonable to see Callicles' position as fulfilling both such requirements. That is, Callicles would not accept the restriction implied in the virtue called 'temperance' if he supposed that it were imposed by popular convention, but it may nevertheless be acceptable to him when understood as genuine self-restraint, involving determinations made by an agent on his behalf about which desires to renounce for the sake of an anticipated overall greater life of satisfaction.

## (5)

I submit, then, that Plato did not create Callicles only to have him knocked down as someone who rejects temperance altogether, as someone who refuses to accept the value of any restraint at all on a person's desire. As I have tried to show, there is enough evidence to suggest that this is not Callicles' position. What is more, and relatedly, there is little suggestion, apart from a brief, insincere and repentant claim on his part, that we are meant to understand Callicles as a hedonist, either as a perpetual itch-scratcher or long-term maximizer of pleasure. Apart from suffering from a lack of evidence, such interpretations simply do not

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<sup>40</sup> *Contra* White 1985, n.1, who says, 'the virtue of *sophrosyne* can be divided into two types, one serving society, and the other being self-interested prudence. Callicles rejects *both* of these' (italics mine).

<sup>41</sup> Later, to Socrates' question whether states of the well-ordered soul are appropriately called justice and temperance (504d1-3), Callicles replies ἔστω. This response is perhaps somewhat revealing. Though that expression appears to withhold the agreement it supposedly gives, it may only be because Callicles does not agree with Socrates' pairing of justice and temperance, he does not see these as similar virtues. His seemingly partial acceptance might signify that he does acknowledge some form of temperance (see Johnson 2005, 118).

get at, or target, the real, more practical issue at hand in this discussion: how to turn from the life of a politician or rhetorician to a life of philosophy and virtue.

This raises the important question of what Plato is up to here. Why has Plato constructed this discussion with Callicles if Socrates was not made to really get at the heart of Callicles' position and Callicles, even at the end, remains as he was?<sup>42</sup> Though I think we can take some of what Callicles is made to say, and commit himself to, as suggestive of the fact that rhetoricians and powerful individuals like Callicles have not entirely thought things out, a more extensive explanation is that Plato himself, during the writing of the *Gorgias*, has not yet worked out a solution in any great argumentative and substantive detail; or, if he has, thinks it requires too much of a detailed discussion of complex psychological matters to include in this dialogue. We might plausibly see the *Gorgias* then as a work primarily meant to *prepare* the reader for a more full-scaled treatment of the issue.

This work is almost certainly the (later) *Republic*. After all, the indications given by Plato in the *Gorgias* point in the direction that Callicles is to become a misguided ruler, and in Book 9 of the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates spend significant time describing the state of the oligarchical, democratical and tyrannical man and in Books 2-3, has him advance a full blown theory of early education—the sort designed to imbue youths with the indelible dye of virtue (*Rep.* 4, 429d4-430b2) so that they do not go on, like Callicles, to develop moral resistance. At the heart of this theory of education is the idea that the young are to be protected from all that is ignoble and bad and surrounded with persons and objects worthy of imitation and as a result assimilate beauty and goodness into their souls; and so when reason develops they will have been emotionally prepared by proper habituation to welcome its principles and guidance (*Rep.* 3, 401d5-402a4). Of course, it may be too late for the older unhabituated and recalcitrant Callicles, but what the theory does ensure is that, having been habituated to virtue during their early years, there will be little danger of another sort like Callicles cropping up among the youth.

In the *Gorgias*, Plato, through Callicles, expresses a formidable view and way of life, one he seems to think, as I have tried to show, is not reducible to any simple classification and ultimately resistant to argument. I suggest then that we understand the *Gorgias* as a kind of testing ground in Plato's mind, where he tries to explore just how it is the life of philosophy and virtue can be seen to win out over the Calliclean way of life. The outcome of this testing ground is the realization on Plato's part that he cannot really defeat or overcome the position he attributes to Callicles (no doubt an outlook he sees as prevalent at this time) unless he goes even deeper, to the real *source* of the problem. It is to this that he directs his attention in the *Republic*.

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<sup>42</sup> Callicles becomes increasingly detached as the discussion goes on and it becomes hard for Socrates to extract even token concessions from him. Signalling that Callicles has not changed his views at all, Socrates, at the very end of the dialogue, says: 'For it's a shameful thing for us, being in the condition we appear to be in at present—when we never think the same about the same subjects, the most important ones at that—to sound off as though we're somebodies. That's how far behind in education we've fallen' (527d).

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