

## **Discuss critically the differing notions of power and freedom explored in the 'Gorgias'.**

What starts off as a discussion surrounding rhetoric, within the Gorgias, quickly but unsurprisingly transcends into a dialogue concerning the nature of virtue of which the notions of freedom and power are intrinsically linked. Plato has the dialogue played out between Socrates and four others. Gorgias a famous Sophist and rhetorician, Polus his eager student, Callicles x and Chairephon a friend of Plato who plays little part in the dialogue. This essay shall split the dialogue into three parts, with each part considering Socrates debate with each of the three main protagonists. In each instance, the ideas of each individual regarding power and freedom will be expressed, Socrates' response examined and the resulting implications surrounding his personal ideas explored. From this analysis, any overriding ideas throughout the dialogue may then be distinguished.

Throughout the dialogues, power is usually the focus of discussion as opposed to freedom but it is fair to conclude that the concepts of power and freedom are so deeply intertwined that it often becomes difficult to disentangle them. Certainly Socrates and the three others seem to have similarly conflicting viewpoints regarding freedom and power. Usually in disproving his opponents views on power, he also, in conjunction, shows their idea of freedom to be faulty.

The dialogue first introduces the notion of power via Gorgias, whom when questioned by Socrates declares rhetoric to be "the greatest and noblest of affairs". Upon being asked by Socrates why this and not other professions such as medicine are not as noble, Gorgias retorts that a rhetorician can persuade a crowd to their personal line of thought through their oratory skills. In this lies power since they can dictate the desires of the population and bend them to their own device. Gorgias uses an instance of him competing against a real doctor to outline his point, he states that it would for him, as a skilled person in rhetoric, be easy to persuade an assembly or equivalent that it is he who is the expert in medicine and not the doctor. He could then get profit from this by being selected for posts above the real doctor. This is the notion of power that Gorgias believes an orator possesses. Power for Gorgias is the main goal in life and since, through persuasion, he believes he can achieve power, rhetoric becomes the supreme art for him.

Gorgias does not dispute Socrates' attack on his ideas, in that there is no truth in what a rhetorician can state i.e no real medical knowledge is necessary in order for the orator to convince a crowd that he is the expert. Socrates points out that there is no worth in convincing a crowd ignorant of medicine that you are knowledgeable in the subject. No good will come from this, there is no benefit here for society, nor is there any good for the individual. The orator does not further themselves by continuing on with such flattery, they are merely guessing at true knowledge.

Gorgias also claims to be able to last web page



Polus enters the conversation on the side of his teacher Gorgias and in particular is shocked when Socrates dismisses rhetoric as being equivalent to cooking in worth and the idea of

Despite talk of flattery, Polus maintains that the orator is the most powerful person in a community because he can do whatever he pleases, “like tyrants, put to death any man they will” is the example he offers. Socrates response to this is simply “No, if by power you mean something good for its possessor” the ability to do whatever one pleases is not actually power. Wielding power is not good in its own right, there also needs to be some benefit coupled with the power.

Plato uses the idea that rhetoricians are not intelligent in their own right to comment that if power is the ability to get what you want then a rhetorician, without any intelligence nor rational expertise lacks power.

Plato’s argument here is not as convincing since he redefines “want” continually throughout this section. He appears to restrict wanting to cases where it is actual and not just apparent. Some commentators argue that Plato is deepening our understanding of want and not just changing his definition to suit his argument or alternatively highlighting the spurious nature of oratory, there is no real knowledge at the base of rhetoric could be the subtle point he is making. This line of thought though probably affords Plato too much credit in this instance.

Polus continues to claim that political speakers have power, to which Socrates paradoxically replies that they “have the least power of any in the state”. In order to back this up Socrates claims that, although you may be able to do what is best, it is not necessarily true that you can do what you actually want. This is because of the fact that what you want is going to be good for you, while politicians always aim for their own personal good but if they do not appreciate what this good is they will end up doing what they do not. If they are doing what they do not want then they surely have no power.

To complete the paradox, the philosopher claims that politicians especially are likely to be led away by others in order to gain approval rather than pursuing their own personal good which would be beneficial for them. The conclusion is that those who apparently have the most power turn out to in fact have the very least.

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Socrates brings up the issue of freedom by insisting on a distinction between doing as one sees fit and doing what one wants i.e negative and positive freedom. Polus has showed that the orator can do as he sees fit, but that doesn't automatically mean that he can do what he wants. Socrates argues, and Polus agrees, that some things are good, some things are bad, and some things are in themselves indifferent but can be either good or bad depending on how they're used. What we want are the good things, but sometimes we must do the indifferent things (some of which may be very disagreeable, like taking medicine or going on a sea voyage) in order to get the good things. We don't want the



indifferent things for their own sake, though; we want them for the sake of the good things. So strictly speaking, it's the good things we want.

However Socrates in many ways is not really justified in drawing a distinction between freedoms since

If, however, we are mistaken about the connection between what we're doing and that for the sake of which we're doing it, we won't in fact be doing what we want. If I willingly take a bitter medicine in order to attain health, but in fact the medicine won't cure me, I'm not doing what I want, even though I'm doing as I see fit. In the same way, if I put someone to death or confiscate his property, but doing these things won't actually be for good, then I'm not doing what I want, even though I'm doing as I see fit."

Following Polus' acception of Socrates ideas Callicles enters the fray, in this the last section of the book. His arguments go beyond that of Polus, he approves of power over others in order that one can indulge their whims. His philosophy on how one should live is that of "might is right" citing nature as his justification a very similar line that was ultimately to be taken up by Neitzsche.

Socrates points out though that his ideas may leave one vulnerable to an aggressor. "Can a man avoid being wronged if it be his will to avoid it" is posed as a question by Socrates, intuitively and for Callicles this would appear to be false. To avoid being wronged and hence to have real freedom you need power to protect yourself be it political or otherwise. Since doing wrong is involuntary, a consequence of error, you especially need power to protect yourself from this seemingly inevitable occurrence.

For Socrates, the problem this idea of power being necessary brings is that it assumes life at any cost is desirable even at a cost of moral corruption. Socrates replies that if life is in fact the highest good, then even if rhetoric lead to power and hence the ability to survive one should also consider other examples such as swimming which has the potential to save lives. Even more so the mechanic who may save an entire community through the machines he builds. If mere life is viewed as the highest good, then these are equally as important as power in this respect. This goes a long way in showing that power is not necessary for freedom. It goes against Callicles definition of power being the freedom to do what you wish.

In essence we find that Socrates is arguing that power is not an external force but an internal one, power over oneself i.e. self control is more important than power over others. It is this critical idea that separates Socrates from Gorgias, Polus and Callicles. Socrates links true power inherently to having an ordered, controlled body and soul. Since rhetoric, as shown by Socrates, contains no real knowledge and is simply false knowledge, no agathon or beneficial good is derived for the body or soul and hence this "flattery" does not provide you with any true power.

The use of a dialogue on rhetoric to explore notions of power can be seen as clever on the part of Plato, since the common but false view of power, power over



**others, like rhetoric, gives out an impressive image but ultimately does little to advance the good and has little real worth.**

the discipline to act justly, live virtuously, and not need anything.

**Additional pertinence is carried, when one considers the recent events surrounding the historical Socrates death. Socrates was willing to die if it be the will of the government even though he had the means to escape.**

This treatment of power becomes all the more significant in light of the events surrounding Socrates' actual trial and death. The philosopher was accused of corrupting through false instruction and treason, and convicted and executed because of his refusal to admit having acted wrongly. In light of this event and its close proximity to *Gorgias'* creation, then, the nature of power for Plato takes on crucial importance in that he must prove his teacher died in strength rather than weakness.

**For Socrates' contemporaries, the rampant view of power is the ability to rule over others and to satisfy one's own desires. This position is best expressed by Polus (466–69) and Callicles (490–492).**

**Plato takes great care to debunk this formulation. On the one hand, Socrates argues, those who rule others often must perform actions they do not will in order to benefit the state of which they are in charge. In this sense then, apparently powerful tyrants are often unable to act as they will, and true power is shown to consist of something other than ruling over others. At the same time, those who repeatedly satisfy their desires do not possess real power because this gratification further fuels rather than extinguishes the appetites. A person capable of always satisfying desire is in constant need of more satisfaction, and as such possesses no true power. This point is illustrated in 493b by the metaphor of the leaky jar.**

**Mention of probable proximity of Socrates execution to book and themes this may have inspired.**

**Socrates views freedom for the most part, whether there is anything within that has any element of control. This would include not having any addictions or other strong needs. Ideally reducing ones needs until one is content with what is to hand is best.**

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