

Ethics of Leadership

Should Leaders Study Philosophy?

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Reading

- Plato, *Gorgias* (PDF on webpage).

Background

The *Gorgias* is a dialogue written around 380 BCE by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. It begins as conversation between the philosopher Socrates and the orator Gorgias concerning the nature of rhetoric. The conversation quickly turns into a more general discussion about what our leaders should know in order to govern wisely and what happens when wise persons are not in command.

At the time the *Gorgias* was written, it was commonly thought that an education in rhetoric was indispensable for good leadership. This makes Gorgias a popular teacher and his students Polus and Callicles anxious to defend him. Plato, however, was a student of the actual Socrates, and so Plato writes this dialogue with Socrates essentially suggesting to remove rhetoric from the leadership curriculum and to replace it with philosophy.

Consequently, throughout this discussion, Plato has us compare the competing ways of life that Gorgias and Socrates represent. Plato wants us to consider whether the best leader is an orator practicing rhetoric or a philosopher pursuing truth. Given that he is a philosopher, it is not difficult to predict which leader Plato favors. Even so, many people believe that Socrates is never fully able to satisfactorily refute the brutal argument, presented here by Callicles, against a life devoted to philosophy.

Plato was truly a philosopher-poet, so there are two things to note about this text. First, it is a work of fiction. So while all the characters in the dialogue are based on real people, the conversation here comes from Plato's imagination. Second, Plato often adopts the artistic tactic of showing rather than telling. This can make things frustratingly difficult at times, but the following questions should point you in the right direction for making sense of this fascinating and ever relevant work of philosophy.

Questions

1. Socrates discussion with Gorgias culminates with the following claims:

- Rhetoric allows "someone who doesn't know [to be] more persuasive, with those who don't know, than someone who does know" (459b), and
- The orator "can appear to those who don't know to know more than those who do know" (459c).

(Take a moment to parse those sentence so you understand them.)

What justifies these claims? To answer this, consider the following:

- How does Gorgias define rhetoric (first at 452e and then at 454b)?
- Why does Gorgias believe this makes rhetoric concerned with the greatest good? What *is* this greatest good exactly?
- When it comes to either teaching or convincing (at 454c–555a), which does rhetoric do according to Gorgias?
- Does Gorgias believe that the orator must have knowledge about the things he or she is talking about in order to practice rhetoric?

In light of your answers to these questions, do you think rhetoric is essential for any leader?

2. Growing uncomfortable with the conversation, Polus interrupts and starts to interrogate Socrates (at 462b–466a). What does Socrates ultimately believe rhetoric does? How does this make rhetoric similar to cookery and fashion? How are these comparisons supposed to illustrate why rhetoric is a bad thing? How does Polus defend rhetoric by comparing it with tyranny (at 466a–e)? Which of these arguments do you believe is more plausible?
3. Not liking this at all, Callicles now enters the discussion with a lengthy critique of Socrates' position. What does Callicles say (at 483d) is the essence of a true leader? Why does this cause Callicles to dismiss the value of philosophy (at 484c–486d) for leadership? Why might Callicles then be attracted to rhetoric instead? Do you agree with his analysis? How does Socrates address this challenge? Is Socrates persuasive?
4. Throughout this dialogue (see especially 453c, 454b–c, 457c–b, 471e–472c, 487e–488b, and 500c–d), Socrates repeatedly draws attention to his method of discussion and why it is so important for addressing the topics of leadership and leading a good life. Today this is known as the "Socratic Method", though Plato and Socrates probably just see it as "what philosophy does". What does Socrates say is the greatest evil (at 458b) and what does he think is the real goal of human life (at 487e)? Do you agree? Is philosophy the best way to attain these things? Does this mean that good leadership requires an education in philosophy?