

# ETHICS of LEADERSHIP

## Should Leaders Study Philosophy?

As you read the material for our 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 reading:

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 about these issues at our next class meeting.

### Reading

- Plato, *Gorgias*.

### 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.

Finally, some warnings. 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 two claims on page 23:
  - 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 on page 14, and then at 454b on page 16)?
  - Why does Gorgias believe this makes rhetoric concerned with the *greatest* good? What is this greatest good exactly?
  - What is the difference between teaching and convincing, and which one does rhetoric do according to Gorgias (at 454c–555a on pages 17–18)?
  - Does Gorgias believe that the orator must have knowledge about the things he or she is talking about in order to practice rhetoric and be a successful orator?
2. Growing uncomfortable with the conversation, Polus interrupts and starts to interrogate Socrates (at 462b–466a on pages 27–31). 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? What is Polus' defense of rhetoric (at 466a–e on pages 31–33)?
  3. Not liking this at all, Callicles now enters the discussion with a lengthy critique of Socrates' position. What does Callicles say (at 483d on page 58) is the essence of a true leader? Why does this cause Callicles to dismiss the value of philosophy (at 484c–486d on pages 59–61) for leadership? How does Socrates respond to this challenge?
  4. Throughout this dialogue (see especially (A) 453c on page 15, (B) 454b–c on pages 16–17, (C) 457c–458b on pages 20–21, (D) 471e–472c on pages 40–41, (E) 487e–488b on pages 62–63, and (F) 500c–d on pages 80–81), Socrates repeatedly draws attention to his method of discussion and why this method 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 on page 21) and what does he think is the real goal of human life (at 487e on page 62)? Why does Socrates seem to believe that his method is the best one for achieving this goal?