Plato on Conversation and Experience

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Abstract
Plato's dialogues show discourse strategies beyond purely intellectual methods of persuasion. The usual assumption is that linguistic understanding depends on a match of inner experiences. This is partly explained by an underlying engagement with the historical Gorgias on discourse and psychology, as well as Parmenides on philosophical *logos*. In the *Gorgias* and the *Symposium*, speakers cannot understand alien experiences by philosophical conversation alone. There is no developed alternative model of understanding in the Platonic dialogues. The difficulties in bringing 'philistine souls' into Socratic alignment are the result of possessing an inferior soul, suffering misdirected passions, or missing the philosophy bug.

All readers of Plato encounter the tortured and provisional character of philosophical conversation in the dialogues (*Ap*. 37A3–41C7; *Gorg*. 527D2–5; *Phd*. 107A2–B10). The *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and *Euthydemus* discuss several aspects of philosophical exchanges, especially the distinction of the elenchus from rhetoric, eristic, and other sophistic techniques. The very possibility of successful conversation is a persistent theme.[1] One problem for scholarship is the significance of discourse methods that Plato's Socrates adopts beyond purely intellectual methods of persuasion. In several passages, the assumption voiced by Socrates is that linguistic understanding depends on a match of inner experiences. Otherwise, the speakers cannot easily reconcile their dissimilar experiences. As I will argue, there is an underlying engagement with the historical Gorgias on discourse and psychology, as well as Parmenides on philosophical *logos*. I hope that these contrasts will help to place some familiar passages and themes in a new light.

[1] I hope to further a trend in recent studies to broaden the scope of theory of language in Plato, traditionally focused on logic, metaphysics, and the origins of language. Some examples of this new trend are J. B. White, 'The Reconstitution of Language and Self in a Community of Two', in *When Words Lose Their Meaning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 93–113; D. Blank, 'The Arousal of Emotion in Plato's Dialogues', *Classical Quarterly* **43** (1993), 428–439; T. W. Bestor, 'Plato's Semantics and Plato's Cave', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* **14** (1996), 33–82; A. N. Michelini, '*POLLÊ AGROIKIA*: Rudeness and Irony in Plato's *Gorgias*', *Classical Philology* **93** (1998), 50–59.

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I

I will begin with a short preface to my topic. There is heavy attention to conversational matters in virtually all the dialogues, although this is often related to personal conflict. Personal conflict is especially prominent in the *Gorgias* and *Euthydemus*, an account of Socrates' testy encounters with the sophists and rhetors (*Gorg.* 486E5–6; 487E6–7; *Eud.* 277D1–278D3; 304C6–D2). Another feature in many dialogues is the angry emotional response of Socrates' interlocutors (and listeners) when subjected to dialectic, whether self-directed or other-directed (*Symp.* 215D1–216B6; *Soph.* 230B4–E3). However, I propose that we take seriously what goes wrong in the conversation itself.

Let me list some examples of what I mean. One problem is frustrated understanding, a theme I will develop in this paper. For example, at a late stage in his exchanges with Callicles in the *Gorgias*, Socrates remarks, 'Now you and I are doing an odd thing in the conversation (*en tois logois*), for in the entire time during which we engage in dialogue (*dialegometha*) we cease not at all, always coming back again and again to the same point and remaining in ignorance of each other, what we are saying' (*Gorg.* 517C4–7; cf. 488B8–491D3). Another problem is mismatched levels of discourse. This is a recurrent theme in the first half of the *Euthydemus*, based on the contrast of Socratic seriousness and eristic frivolity (*Eud.* 278B2–D3; 288B3–D4). And still another problem is one's style in dialectical exchanges. For example, Socrates and Euthydemus dispute Socrates' penchant for asking questions in dialectical situations that would require an answer (*Eud.* 295B2–9); also, consider the uncomfortable adjustment of interlocutors to Socrates and *vice versa* (*Prot.* 335A9–C7; 336B7–D5). Finally, there is concern with the emotions that disturb the conversation, especially anger or annoyance (*Prot.* 332A2–4; *Eud.* 285A2–D6).

Somehow or other, these conversational dramas are meant to showcase the Socratic way of promoting virtue. The elenchus is supposed to lead speakers to moral goodness and purge people from evils.[2]

[2] From a developmentalist perspective, some scholars have argued that prior to adopting the Method of Hypothesis in the *Meno* and *Republic*, the Method of Elenchus comes under extensive re-examination in several 'transitional' dialogues (*Euthydemus*, *Gorgias*, *Lysis*, *Hippias Major*), as well as some 'Middle Period' dialogues (*Cratylus*, *Meno*): G. Vlastos, 'The Socratic Elenchus', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* **1** (1983), 27–58 at 57–58; T. Irwin, *Plato. Gorgias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 111, 170; C. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 46–65, 142–145. I would agree that the elenchus undergoes revision in several dialogues; in this paper, I am

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Unfortunately, it has a quite mixed record of success in the dialogues, particularly the more ambitious dialogues that tangle with the sophists.[3] In the *Euthydemus*, no developed elenchus ever confronts Euthydemus and Dionysodorus (*Eud.* 286B7–288A7 might count as an exception), while Socrates' protreptic cross-examination of Cleinias succeeds without much struggle. The polemical *Gorgias* also presents arguments with protreptic overtones, but to a lesser degree than the *Euthydemus*. Finally, the Socrates of the *Protagoras* does not engage in much protreptic, while the elenchic passages eventually embarrass Socrates for denying that virtue is teachable.

In these dialogues, especially the *Gorgias* and *Euthydemus*, Socrates and his interlocutors persist in misunderstanding, on account of their root experiences, desires, and values. The psychological barriers eventually become quite evident.[4]

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merely pursuing one aspect of dialectical conversation in a few selected dialogues.

[3] Many studies have compared Socratic methods with Sophistic tactics. J. Gentzler, 'The Sophistic Cross-Examination of Callicles in the *Gorgias*', *Ancient Philosophy* **15** (1995), 17–43 at 23–30 provides a detailed comparison of the types of cross-examination in the *Gorgias* and the *Euthydemus*. R. Jackson, 'Socrates' Iolaos: Myth and Eristic in Plato's *Euthydemus*', *Classical Quarterly* **40** (1990), 378–395 argues a genuine contrast between Socratic elenchus and Sophistic eristic, in spite of the disappointing outcome for Socrates in the *Euthydemus*.

[4] There is a conceptual analogue in contemporary linguistics. Some theorists have defined 'pragmatic overshoot' as the violation by one speaker of the pragmatic rules of another speaker's world model, on account of some discrepancy in their views of the world: R. M. Weischedel and N. K. Sondheimer, 'Meta-rules as a Basis for Processing Ill-Formed Input', *American Journal of Computational Linguistics* **9** (1983), 161–177; M. S. Carberry, 'The Use of Inferred Knowledge in Understanding Pragmatically Ill-Formed Queries', in *Communication Failure in Dialogue and Discourse*, ed. R. G. Reilly (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1987), 187–200; N. Coupland, H. Giles, and J. M. Wiemann, 'Talk as "Problem" and Communication as "Miscommunication": An Integrative Analysis', in *'Miscommunication' and Problematic Talk*, eds. N. Coupland, H. Giles, and J. M. Wiemann (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1991), 1–17 at 11–16; C. D. Mortensen, *Problematic Communication. The Construction of Invisible Walls* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1994), 5, 38–42, 149–151, 196–198.

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II

This issue takes shape in the dialogues that feature extended engagements with the sophists, short of the sweeping ambitions of the *Republic*. At least three passages directly claim that likenesses of experience and desire make linguistic understanding possible on virtue and the good life (*Gorg*. 481C5–D5; 482C4–486D1; *Prot*. 348C5–348E1). This is the weaker claim. Sometimes we find the stronger claim (with Collingwood) that understanding may be enabled by prior experiences and desires, but it may also be disabled by our experiences.[5] In the spirit of the weaker claim, Socrates tries to win over Protagoras to a serious question-and-answer exchange (*Prot*. 348C5–E1; cf. *Prot*. 347E1–349A6).

> Protagoras, I said, don't think that my discourse with you proceeds under any other counsel than to examine matters that I myself find puzzling on various occasions. I think that Homer said it all, 'Advancing in tandem, one perceives before the other' (*Il*. 10.224). Human beings are simply more resourceful this way in action, speech, and thought. If someone has an inner experience, he immediately starts going around seeking to whom he might show it and to whom he might confirm it, until he is successful. And so for this reason I would gladly discourse with you more than anyone else, considering that you would investigate most impressively concerning matters that are suitable for decent men to examine, and particularly concerning virtue.

The idea is that inner experiences (*eiper te noêsêi*) are communicable insofar as the soul finds a match for them (cf. *Rep*. 499A11–C2; *Tht*. 155D1–5). The claim is plausible enough. For example, imagine that nothing was generally known about eclipses. It would be more likely for two people (take Socrates and Callias) to reach understanding about an eclipse of the sun witnessed only by Socrates (*Phd*. 99D4–E4), if Callias had previously seen an eclipse of the moon. And in the case of philosophical investigations, it makes sense to devote one's efforts to a virtuous or morally promising interlocutor. It has been argued that Socrates and Protagoras share some important similarities of experience and philosophical outlook, in spite of their differences over the nature and teachability of virtue.[6] In many

[5] R. G. Collingwood, *Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 118–119, 140–141, 157–160, 251.

[6] M. Gagarin, 'The Purpose of Plato's *Protagoras*', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* **100** (1969), 133–164. Gagarin, op. cit.,

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respects, Protagoras comes off better than the other sophists of the dialogues; in fact, he is the only interlocutor who swaps views with Socrates in the course of the arguments.

Alcibiades' drunken speech from the *Symposium* provides an interesting comparison on confirming experiences. By coincidence, he features in both the *Gorgias* (dramatic role) and the *Protagoras* (mention by Socrates). Philosophical inclination is described in terms of snakebite (*Symp*. 217E6–218B7; cf. *Phd*. 62A–69E).

> Further, the experience of someone suffering from snakebite holds in this connection. For word has it that someone suffering this experience is not willing to speak about it except with those who have been bitten, insofar as they alone will understand and will pardon if one is driven to do or to say quite anything on account of the agony. But as things are, I have been bitten by something far more vexing, in fact the most grievous of bites one might incur – I mean the heart, or soul, or whatever one should call it, smitten and bitten by the discourses of philosophy, which fasten their grip more fiercely than a viper, whenever they pierce the soul of a promising youth and compel him to do and say anything whatever. Now I see Phaedrus, Agathon, Eryximachus, Pausanias, Aristodemus, Aristophanes – and as for Socrates himself what need one say, and so many others? All of you have tasted the Bacchic madness of philosophy, hence all of you will listen. You will pardon the things having been done then and the things being said now. But the slaves, and any other base philistine, shut the mighty gates of your ears.

Of course, this is a far cry from the lofty picture advanced by Diotima, that an enlightened desire for one's own good nourishes a desire to give birth in the beautiful, and that we might express our higher desires by way of preserving our inner value for posterity (*Symp*. 207C8–212C3). For Alcibiades merely claims that it is pointless to discuss the experience (*pathos*) of philosophical passion with the uninitiated. Actually, Alcibiades flatters to deceive, for his

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153, argues that Socrates sincerely commends Protagoras for engagement on such matters. 'Two facts support the sincerity of this statement. Firstly, Socrates has constantly endeavored to confine the discussion to Protagoras and himself, refusing to let anyone else even act as referee. Secondly, Protagoras throughout the Great Speech does show a great concern for *aretê*. Thus Socrates' statement is true, and he must be seriously, not ironically, complimenting the sophist.'

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entire speech betrays several points of misunderstanding; in any case he can never capitalize on his spectacular prospects for virtue.[7] His chaotic life cuts his potential short (*Tht*. 150E4–5). Nevertheless, he expresses the stronger claim, if from a rather irrational angle.

Still more passages on this topic appear in the *Gorgias*, another dialogue which examines philosophical conversation.[8] The role of prior experiences is developed by Socrates when he first engages Callicles (*Gorg*. 481C5–D5).

> Well, Callicles, if human beings didn't share common experiences, some sharing one, others sharing another, but one of us had some unique experience not shared by others, it wouldn't be easy for him to communicate what he experienced to the other. I say this because I realize that you and I at present share a common experience: each of the two of us is a lover of two objects, I of Alcibiades, Clinias' son, and of philosophy, and you of the *dêmos* of Athens, and the Demos who is the son of Pyrilampes.[9]

Again, we find the claim that communication is facilitated by matched experiences, but also impeded by mis-matched experiences (the stronger version). As it turns out, Callicles is far more intransigent than, say, Protagoras. Although Socrates praises Callicles at one point for his sincerity and outspoken manner (*Gorg*. 486E5–488B1), he offers less philosophical insight than Protagoras on the subject of virtue, in spite of the common ground supposed by Socrates (*Gorg*. 481C5–D5).

[7] R. Hunter, *Plato's Symposium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 98–112 argues the 'revisionist' case for Alcibiades' distorted picture of Socrates. His showy experiences are not well matched to genuinely philosophical experiences.

[8] A select list of conversation problems in the *Gorgias*: putting words into the mouth of the interlocutors (*Gorg*. 466E4–7; 469E1–6), oblique addresses of conversationalists who are present (*Gorg*. 466E4–7; 448D1–449A4; 481B6–C4), concern with various kinds of speech dysfunction (*Gorg*. 485A4–E2; 519D8–9), concern with what sense of a term (*Gorg*. 469C3–7; 489C1–E9) or statement (*Gorg*. 489A8–B6) is meant, questioning the kind of speech act (*Gorg*. 466B1) or speech genre (*Gorg*. 466C3–5; 473D3–4) meant by the speaker, charging Socrates with interrogating himself in solipsistic discourse (*Gorg*. 505D4–9, cf. 470B11–C3), and even noting the need to repair misunderstanding by reconstructing the lost common ground (*Gorg*. 517C4–518C1).

[9] The translation is adapted from D. J. Zeyl, in *Plato*. *Complete Works*, ed. J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 826.

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At the outset of the Callicles sequences, Socrates hopes that Callicles can be reconciled on the basis of their similar experiences of dual love. Different uses of the term I translate as 'experience' (*pathos*, *pathêma*) appear in the dialogues.[10] In this passage, a psychological experience of desire is meant (*erôs*, *Gorg*. 481D3, cf. 513C4–D1).[11] The content of Socrates' shared experience includes the concept of duality – a strong desire which has dual objects.[12] Reaching people also means incorporating their fundamental desire for the good. As obscured as it might be in Callicles' love for *dêmos*/Demos (*Gorg*. 513C4–6; cf. 1 *Alc*. 131E10–132A7), his desires can be explained in terms of his profound desire for what is truly and unqualifiedly good. So in this derivative sense, the highest good (virtue) is what might connect them in the pursuit of excellence (*Gorg*. 527D1–5). Presumably, Socrates' mention of Alcibiades evokes the *Symposium* – Socrates' power to draw Alcibiades in the pursuit of philosophy. The erotic ascent of the *Symposium* provides a helpful analogy, beginning with bodily attraction (*Symp*. 204D1–210B6; cf. 1 *Alc*. 131C5–132A7). Beyond the lower stages, Callicles might be drawn upwards towards the more worthy goods sought by the philosopher. In view of this one great desire for the good, all our lesser desires for bodily symmetry or civic glory can be explained (*Symp*. 205A5–206B10). If Callicles

[10] Of course, there are several important uses of these words in the *Republic*, where Plato develops parallel accounts of belief and desire. Beliefs are described in almost the same terms used in the *Gorgias* for desires (*Rep*. 511D7) – states of belief and knowledge are expressed as 'experiences in the soul' (*pathêmata en têi psuchêi*).

[11] E. R. Dodds, *Plato. Gorgias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 261 translates *Gorg*. 481C5–D1 as follows. 'If people had not certain feelings (*pathos*) in common, some sharing one feeling, some another, but some of us had unique feelings (*pathos*) unshared by the rest, it would not be easy to reveal one's experience (*pathêma*) to one's neighbour.' According to Dodds, the *pathêma* is the result of the *pathos*. However, the uses of these terms converge quite closely in Plato, occurring with roughly equal frequency. What I understand in this passage (experience of desire) appears in other passages: *Prot*. 352E6; *Phdr*. 250A7; *Phdr*. 251C2; *Symp*. 217E6 (*pathos*); *Gorg*. 524D6; *Prot*. 353A5; *Phil*. 32C1; *Phil*. 41C2 (*pathêma*). The term *pathêma* is almost always used with reference to an experience that is associated with the experience of others: *Ap*. 22C4; *Phd*. 59A5; *Phd*. 68E4; *Soph*. 243C3; *Eud*. 293E3; *Gorg*. 513C5; *Gorg*. 522B3; *Rep*. 488A2; *Leg*. 699E2; *Leg*. 712E6 (*Leg*. 687E2 counts as an exception).

[12] Cf. the channel analogy (*Rep*. 485D6–E1), the philosopher's obsession with what is (*Rep*. 490A8–B7).

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could see clearly what he is really reaching for, he would embrace the goods of justice, temperance, self-sacrifice for the good of the community, and so on. He would discard his egoist moral stance.

In the course of dialectical conversation, the experiences of Socrates and Callicles are clarified to show certain differences. This process depends on a kind of 'psychological realism' – the soul contains experiences that are discoverable, communicable, and rooted in perdurable human nature. Callicles does not deny Socrates' observation that he is obsessed by love for the *dêmos*, but his love involves the desire for power over the Athenians.[13] This provides a shameless account of what it is that Callicles really wants (Calliclean frankness), or what anyone else of sufficient quality would want (*Gorg*. 482C4–E6; 527E5–7). Socrates would be wiser to forsake philosophy and pursue the more honorable aims of political power. Callicles' version of the good life is one of unrestrained hedonism, consisting in endless satisfaction of appetites (*Gorg*. 491E5–492C8) and acquiring power over others in the city. Socrates, on the other hand, allows that the good life requires the satisfaction of desires for things like external goods, but in a moderate and more self-sufficient way (*Gorg*. 491D10–E1; 493C5–7; cf. *Rep*. 558D4–559D2). Philosophical conversation reveals that Callicles is not adequately primed for philosophy; some would call this a 'failure' of Socratic methods.[14] For Callicles' soul has certain stable features, and there

[13] On the other hand, in a later passage (*Gorg*. 513C4–6) the experience (*pathos*) of desire which consumes Callicles is not shared with Socrates, but rather with the Athenian people at large (*pepontha de to tôn pollôn pathos*). Callicles acknowledges his strong psychological attachment, and Socrates repeats the charge that he is subject to the whims of the *demos* (*Gorg*. 513C7–D1).

[14] T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 230; T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 102–106; R. Woolf, 'Callicles and Socrates: Psychic (Dis)harmony in the *Gorgias*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* **18** (2000), 1–40 at 16 n. 21 provide diagnosis of the frustrated outcome as regards Callicles. The question of what constitutes a 'failure' in the dialogues is quite complicated, as H. Fossheim, 'On Plato's Use of Socrates as a Character in his Dialogues', *Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter* (2005/6), 3–16 shows. D. Scott, 'Platonic Pessimism and Moral Education', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* **17** (1999), 15–36 at 16–22; Woolf, op. cit., 28–32 point out that Socratic dialectic retains the power to induce clarity about what interlocutors most deeply desire and value, as well as their fundamentally inconsistent beliefs. Socrates needs to present a complete, clearly specified final good which is rationally acceptable to every moral agent, as

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are clear limits to Socrates' rational persuasion. Perhaps there is some contrast drawn by Plato between the deepening alienation of Callicles in the latter half of the dialogue and the conversational multilateralism of Gorgias in the later stages (*Gorg*. 497B4–10; 506A8–B3); Gorgias shows greater proclivity to take seriously the values and methods of philosophy.

Now why is this scheme important? As I have already suggested, one point is that experiences and desires actually *can* be genuinely mismatched. It is possible to be wrong about who is a soul-mate and who is not, the very thing that is inconceivable for the historical Gorgias (as we will see). For the dialogue eventually reveals that Socrates and Callicles do not have sufficiently similar experiences (cf. Socrates and Alcibiades in the *Symposium*). (It is an interesting question whether further conversation is pointless for speakers with insufficiently similar experiences. This question would require a renewed investigation into the values and purposes of philosophical conversation.[15]) Or take the case of respondents, talented at dialectical exchanges, but who resent being wrong about the strength of arguments. This process is beneficial to the respondents, yet they might never progress in philosophy, for winning such contests is too deeply ingrained in their souls (*Phd*. 89D–E).[16] In fact, this may be a permanent and genuine feature of such initially promising souls, a feature which comes to light under the pressures of dialectical argument (cf. Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in the *Euthydemus*). So I think that this kind of soul clarification is often present in Plato, tending to rank souls in view of prefixed criteria.

This leads to another point. I mean the one-dimensional character of such assumptions about reconciling experiences – there is no consideration of points of view. In the *Republic*, knowledge is argued to

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detailed by Irwin, *Gorgias*, 149–150, 210, 222–224; Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 248–251.

[15] P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 26 outlines some fundamental values and purposes of general conversation. 'Our talk exchanges ... are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction.' D. Sperber and D. Wilson, *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 268 downplay common goals for pragmatic principles in reaction to Grice and his followers, although they retain weaker common purposes involved in all conversation, such as the common goal of mutual understanding.

[16] Blank, op. cit., 430–431 describes such cases at length.

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be independent of any perspective, while personal interests are harmful to the common good. Rather, everything depends on the absolute things (the Forms), even the value of talk exchanges. Philosophical conversation may degrade into a mere quarrel over quirks of language (eristic), rather than a genuinely dialectical exchange which involves the Forms (*Rep*. 454A1–B9). I wonder if for Plato, the experiences of the soul are abstract items; perhaps they are types that have their reality apart from any point of view. As far as I can see, the passages I have highlighted do not show that understanding the content of another's experience may require consideration of the point of view of the other.[17] For example, our twin experiences (representations) of hunger might differ in content on account of circumstantial factors pertaining to such experiences (your dieting, my forgetting to eat breakfast). Alternatively, our hungers might differ in content on account of slight differences in the individuation of our hungers, in spite of the similarities of our hunger experience considered as a type. Considering another's point of view pertaining to such experiences may be quite important for linguistic understanding.[18] It is true that several other factors that improve dialectical exchanges are noted in the dialogues, such as avoiding an unenlightened debate by maintaining fairness in argument (*Tht*. 167E–168B; *Phlb*. 17A), but points of view as a factor in experiences seem to be ignored.

In view of the 'soul clarification' strategy I have outlined, we are reminded that Socratic dialectic is not only based on constructing arguments from premises his interlocutor is supposed to accept for the conclusion Socrates wants to reach, at least in the *Protagoras*

[17] A. W. Moore, 'Points of View', *The Philosophical Quarterly* **37** (1987), 1–12; Sperber and Wilson, op. cit., 38–46, 192–200 discuss what constitutes like or unlike experiences involved in talk exchanges. G. Klosko, 'Criteria of Fallacy and Sophistry for Use in the Analysis of Platonic Dialogues' *Classical Quarterly* **33** (1983), 363–374 at 369–373 argues that the point of view of the interlocutor is important in assessing the arguments that Socrates employs, but this only concerns the logical dimensions of Socratic dialectic.

[18] It is worthwhile to compare this point with the brief remarks of John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 5–6. Dewey thinks that detachment towards the content of one's own experience is always required in order to communicate this content to someone else. We should adopt an attitude towards our experience independent of one's particular point of view; another Deweyan suggestion is that we should adopt an attitude that is adapted to another's point of view.

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and the *Gorgias*.[19] Perhaps the strategy is meant for mature interlocutors who might find the protreptic approach somewhat puerile.

However, there are some complications to this picture, looking beyond the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*. One departure arises in the *Euthydemus*. Euthydemus requests a dialectical response from Socrates on the basis of partial understanding (*dêpou ti … ho legô … pros touto toinun apokrinou ho hupolambaneis*), although this only involves understanding a question (*Eud*. 295B2–C11). There is no sign here of aligning the experiences of the soul. Another possibility is suggested by the famous *antadikein* passage from the *Crito* (*Crit*. 49C10–E2).[20] Socrates divides those select individuals, who adhere to the revolutionary thesis that one should never do wrong in return (*antadikein*), and everyone else in the city.[21] The common ground (*koinê boulê*), namely, endorsing the 'never reciprocate wrongdoing' thesis, provides dialectical leverage.[22] It can lead to genuine dialectical progress, although the important value here is a shared belief, not an inner experience as in the *Gorgias*.[23] Finally, can 'like

[19] In the *Gorgias*, finding any moral gold in the plebeian dross looks unpromising. In the *Republic*, Plato examines the view, only partially developed in the *Gorgias*, that certain loves or desires are what must be overcome by reason in order to turn people from vice to virtue, as detailed by Scott, op. cit., 21 n. 11, 26–36. It is not just a matter of presenting the opponent with arguments which depend on preferences that any rational interlocutor is supposed to accept.

[20] Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, 115, 309; Irwin, *Gorgias*, 5, 227 points out that the *Gorgias* echoes the *Crito* in several respects. The moral thesis of the *Gorgias* that it is better to suffer than to do injustice (*Gorg*. 508E1–509A7; 527B2–5) is similar to the *antadikein* view of the *Crito* that under no circumstances, even when wronged, should one inflict harm on others (*Crit*. 49A4–C9; cf. *Rep*. 335B6–D13). This view is central in the *Gorgias*. It is the first of Socrates' five claims left standing after the previous discussions, until someone can show he is wrong, given his ignorance as to how things are (*Gorg*. 527B2–5; cf. 508E1–509A7).

[21] Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 305–306 discusses the hostility of 'the many' towards philosophers (*Phaedrus*, *Republic*).

[22] I prefer the translation of *koinê boulê* (*Crit*. 49D2–5) as 'common ground', while Irwin translates as 'common deliberation'. According to the TLG database, the *Crito* passage contains a *hapax legomenon* if we cannot rely on the authenticity of uses in 1 *Alc*. 119B1; 124B10; *Ep*. *VIII* 355A3.

[23] Cf. the discussion in the *Meno* on the value of philosophical inquiry, itself established by argument, as a starting point for a dialectical exchange (*Men*. 80C3–81E2, 86A6–E4; cf. *Gorg*. 487E7–488A2). The value of inquiry is even more central to philosophy than the value, usually implicit

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experiences' be habituated in the course of dialectical exchanges? It has been argued that the Aristotelian prospect of training the soul in response to dialectic is implicit in some dialogues (*Phd*. 89D–E; *La*. 194A1–B4; *Men*. 85C9–D1), but a program of training of divergent souls to conform to philosophical experiences and desires is not in view.[24] These are all interesting alternatives, but I must return to my main topic.

III

Now I will take up Gorgias. Gorgias is an intriguing figure on account of his role in Plato's *Gorgias*, his status in Antiquity as a leading light in the development of rhetoric, and his interest in language and psychology.[25] A highly condensed version of his most perplexing work, *On What is Not*, survives in a short Peripatetic treatise *De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia* (*MXG*), and in Sextus Empiricus' *Adversus Mathematicos* (*Math*. 7.65–87).[26] This work

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in other dialogues, of understanding and being understood (*Eud*. 295B7–C11). In the *Meno*, philosophical inquiry amounts to recollection, as examined by D. Scott, *Recollection and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24–52.

[24] Blank, op. cit., 438–439 argues as follows. 'The reference [in *Republic* X] to habituation of the soul towards a measured emotional response brings us inevitably back to Aristotle and his own theory of catharsis. As Aristotle would have said, dialectic properly conducted will train or habituate its audience to display the proper emotion in the proper measure in response to dialectic.'

[25] The philosophical significance of Gorgias of Leontini has attracted substantial discussion: C. P. Segal, 'Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* **66** (1962), 99–155; G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 44–45, 78–110; R. Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric. Gorgias, Plato and their Successors* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 6–51; D. G. Spatharas, 'Patterns of Argumentation in Gorgias', *Mnemosyne* **54** (2001), 393–408.

[26] Wardy, op. cit., 14–15 maintains that *MXG* is far more reliable as a report of Gorgias than Sextus Empiricus, on account of the signs of heavy editorial intervention, doxographical overtones, technical vocabulary germane to Hellenistic philosophy, and the mention of Protagoras (*Math*. 7.65). Even if Wardy is correct, we should not discount what is reported by Sextus regarding the dependence of *logos* on things (material which is missing from *MXG*).

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contains his famous arguments against being, knowledge, and communication. On the other hand, the psychological emphasis of the *Encomium of Helen* and the *Defence of Palamedes* is equally significant.

In brief, Gorgias' position provides a contrast to the psychological realism of the dialogues, by his apparent dismissal of the stable internal experiences and desires that are unearthed in the course of dialectical exchanges. Rather, experiences and desires are crafted by the techniques of rhetoric, which induce conviction in the soul (*Helen* 13–14; Plato, *Men*. 95C1–4). This leads to a strange paradox in the remains of Gorgias. Gorgias would deny that we can connect experiences. Communicating anything, including inner experiences, is impossible, since *logos* is different than what we speak about. 'For that by which we communicate (*mênuomen*) is *logos*, but *logos* is not the realities and things that are (*ta hupokeimena kai onta*); we do not then communicate to others the things that are, but only *logos*, which is other than the realities' (*Math*. 7.84). In other words, only *logos* can be produced by a speaker; other realities like noise or color are inaccessible to the soul apart from our faculties of hearing or sight (*Math*. 7.84–5; *MXG* 980a-b). All purported representations of such experiences must fail.[27] So then *logos* has the power to manufacture psychic experience, but psychic experience cannot be communicated. From this angle, the 'soul clarification' strategy in Plato redeems certain integral features of human nature from the toils of Gorgianic sophistry.

Admittedly, the outrageous arguments of *On What is Not* may present Gorgias' play with Eleatic techniques more than anything else.[28] This does not look like serious metaphysics. Some scholars have understood Gorgias as challenging the impersonal, rational authority of Parmenidean *logos*. Certainly, Parmenides' austere view of persuasion makes no allowance for the role of opinion and emotions that is so prominent in Gorgias (DK fr. 2, fr. 6–8). Gorgias' concept of *logos* disregards truth and knowledge, at least

[27] R. Wardy, 'Rhetoric', in *Greek Thought. A Guide to Classical Knowledge*, eds. J. Brunschwig and G. E. R. Lloyd (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 465–485 covers these points in detail.

[28] It has long been recognized that Gorgias is strongly influenced by the methods of Zeno, Melissus, and Parmenides, as argued by W. Nestle, 'Die Schrift des Gorgias "über die Natur oder über das Nichtseiende"', *Hermes* **57** (1922), 551–562; E. Bux, 'Gorgias und Parmenides', *Hermes* **76** (1941), 393–407. Some of these points are continued by G. B. Kerferd, 'Gorgias on Nature or That Which Is Not', *Phronesis* **1** (1955), 3–25 at 20–23.

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when compared to Plato. In addition to being cut off from its objects, *logos* is deceptive.[29] The values and goals of rhetoric run counter to Plato's concern with absolute standards, validated by the Forms. Short of this path to absolute truth and reality, things become rather murky and deceptive. It is by virtue of the intelligible realities that any *logos* attains some measure of truth, even if our *logoi* deal with objects that are at a remove from truth (cf. *Tim*. 29B1–D3).[30] Gorgias is not properly committed to a notion of falsehood (or truth) that depends on independent reality, while Plato envisions a sovereignty to the ultimate reality of things, which language use, employing imperfect images, should respect.[31]

IV

In conclusion, I think Plato is dicing with Gorgias philosophically in the very dialogues which are most heavily concerned with forms of discourse. In the *Gorgias* (as well as the *Symposium*) the view is that speakers cannot understand alien experiences by conversation alone, even by the rigors of the Socratic elenchus. Unfortunately, there is no developed alternative model in the Platonic dialogues for accessing another's differing experiences. However, helpful clarifications of stable features of the soul are possible. The difficulties in bringing 'philistine souls' into Socratic alignment are the result of possessing an inferior soul, suffering misdirected passions, or missing the philosophy bug. It is not so much the intrinsic limitations of Socratic techniques – this would be the crux of the matter for Gorgias. For Gorgias, souls are infinitely malleable by technical discourse strategies, hence failure to win over hard cases would

[29] This is a major theme of both rhetorical discourses (DK 82: B11, B11a). Kerferd, op. cit., 78–82; Segal, op. cit., 103–135 provide additional explanation.

[30] Needless to say, there is an extensive scholarly literature on language, truth, and the Forms. I have particularly benefited from M. H. Partee, 'Plato's Theory of Language', *Foundations of Language* **8** (1972), 113–132; R. Patterson, *Image and Reality in Plato's Metaphysics* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1985), 28, 34, 111–113, 158.

[31] Plato alleges Gorgias' clever speechmaking and its effects on the soul, regardless of what is objectively true or false (*Men*. 95C1–4). The issue is discussed by Segal, op. cit., 110–112; J. M. Robinson, 'On Gorgias', in *Exegesis and Argument. Studies in Greek Philosophy Presented to Gregory Vlastos*, eds. E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. M. Rorty (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), 49–60; Kerferd, op. cit., 79–82.

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expose some shortcomings of Socratic *logos*. For my part, I take these frustrations in the dialogues more as explorations of character than as limitations of method. Perhaps it is possible to see Plato as finding a *via media* between the philosophical rigor of Parmenides and the playful opportunism of Gorgias.[32]

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[32] In the course of several stages of work, I have benefited from the generous responses of Richard Sorabji, M. M. McCabe, John Peterman, Rafe Woolf, Marina McCoy, and many others.

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