May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Does Socrates Engage in Socratic Argumentation?

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Abstract:
In Plato's *Gorgias* Socratic dialectic progresses beyond its earlier, adversarial refutative form to a new "cooperative" Socratic argumentation which (allegedly) leads to truth and knowledge. Socrates there outlines certain preliminary conditions underlying such positive talk-exchanges, prior attitudes and commitments required of his interlocutors in order for their discourse to be able to produce genuine, reasoned, mutual agreements. I use van Eemeren and Grootendorst's general views as a framework for identifying these preliminary conditions, and then consider whether Socrates himself meets his own standards as a legitimate participant in genuine Socratic argumentation.

In his book *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*,1 acclaimed Platonic scholar Gregory Vlastos devotes a chapter to the enticing question, "Does Socrates Cheat?". The paradigmatic dialogue for early Socratic dialectic is Plato's *Gorgias*, a work in which Socrates engages in discussions with three interlocutors: the famed rhetor Gorgias; Gorgias's follower Polus; and Polus's spirited associate Callicles. In his chapter Vlastos carefully examines two arguments Socrates puts to Polus, concluding in this regard, although "[Socrates] the debater is more in evidence than the disinterested seeker after truth" (*SI* 155), in the end, Socrates "enforc[es] on [Polus] to the letter the rules of dialectical disputation" (*SI* 156). But while Vlastos provides a strong case with regard to his evaluation of Socrates's treatment of Polus, he does not address a very different view expressed by Callicles later in the dialogue. Callicles not only specifically charges that Socrates does indeed cheat, he adds on a multitude of other related indictments, including that Socrates dissembles, lies, and coerces. Examination of these charges constitutes the second major topic of this paper.

But this topic necessarily is preceded by another, for Callicles's charges cannot properly be evaluated without first determining what are "the rules of (Socratic) dialectical disputation", that is, the conditions of Socratic argumentation; the determination of these conditions constitutes the first major topic of this paper. As it happens, *Gorgias* is the ideal context for both of these topics, for it, more than any other dialogue in the Platonic corpus, contains significant portions of both theory and practice of Socratic argumentation. In particular, Socrates there has much to say concerning the preliminary conditions for such argumentation, the prior attitudes and commitments required of legitimate participants in order for their discourse genuinely to be able to produce reasoned, mutual agreement on the topic at issue. In this paper these preliminary conditions for Socratic argumentation are expressly identified in order that the commitments Socrates demands of both his interlocutors and himself are clear. Once this is accomplished, the charges against Socrates by Callicles are carefully examined in context in an effort to determine whether or not Socrates does indeed violate his own stated codes of conduct. While not definitively conclusive, what this examination reveals is that there is considerable circumstantial evidence to suggest that Socrates does fail to act in a manner consistent with his stated guidelines, and hence does not himself engage in legitimate Socratic argumentation.
(I) Preliminary Conditions For Socratic Argumentation

Early in *Gorgias* Socrates revealingly contrasts the sort of discussion in which he wishes to engage with that which was popularly practised and which he wishes to avoid. Argumentative discussions in his time ordinarily were competitive affairs, verbal battles such that

if in a dispute one speaker should say that the other speaks incorrectly or unclearly, they become ill-tempered and think the other to speak maliciously against them, being lovers of victory rather than investigators of the matter under discussion. (457d1-5)

In other words, argumentation as commonly practised at that time was an adversarial contest concerned only with winning, not with the correctness of the victorious position. By specifically identifying and rejecting such a sort of disputation Socrates makes clear that his own conception of dialectic is very different from the norm. As such, determination of the preconditions governing Socratic argumentation must not involve the importation of content from external sources, but rather must rely only upon what Socrates himself provides.

Socrates wishes to have nothing to do with ordinary contentious adversarial debate. Rather, he deems himself to be a seeker of truth rather than a lover of victory, and he insists that his interlocutors be of the same sort. Hence, Socrates tells Gorgias,

If then you also should be a man of the same sort as am I, I would gladly question you; but if not, I would let go. And of what sort am I? One of those gladly refuted if I say something untrue, and one who gladly refutes if someone else says something untrue, and am not more annoyed to be refuted than to refute. (458a1-5)

Socrates emphasises his desire that his interlocutor share this attitude by repeating this condition to Gorgias: "If then you are also such as I describe, let us converse." (458b1-2) In this way Socrates foreshadows his overall position regarding rational discourse: discussants engaged in reasoned argumentation are to be committed to the refutation of untruth concerning the topic at issue, and to regard only the argument and not themselves in their quest.

The goal of Socratic argumentation is reasoned *mutual* agreement; as such, the premises employed and conclusions reached must be accepted both by Socrates's interlocutor and by Socrates himself. This need for such dual acceptance is emphasised by several of Socrates's remarks:

but if I cannot produce you yourself as one witness agreeing with that which I say, I deem myself to have accomplished nothing worth mentioning concerning that which our discussion is of (472b6-c1);

I think you to have accomplished nothing, if I, being only one, should not bear witness for you (472c1-2);

you alone, being one, agreeing and bearing witness are sufficient for me, and putting you alone to the vote I let the others alone. (475e9-476a2)

Thus, in order for the discussion to reach genuine reasoned agreement each interlocutor must "bear witness" for
the other, that is, they must mutually attest to the reasoning employed. This point is of considerable importance for the following reason. Socratic argumentation is not some disputatious attempt by Socrates to gain victory over an opponent by refuting his position through any means necessary; rather, it is an exercise in which its participants genuinely are "investigators of the matter under discussion" and are "not more annoyed to be refuted than to refute". As such, Socratic argumentation demands full and sincere commitment on the part of all of its participants, and hence any conditions applying to its participants apply to Socrates as well.

While mutual attestations are not easy to obtain, they are worth the effort, as Socrates reveals later in the dialogue. Early in his discussion with Callicles Socrates implores his interlocutor to join him in their venture, for its potential fruit is of the highest import-truth:

I know well that, if you should agree with that which my soul believes, forthwith these things themselves are the truth (486e5-6);

If in our discussion you should agree with me about something, this will already have been tested adequately by me and you, and it will no longer be necessary to apply to it another test (487e1-3);

In fact then agreement between me and you forthwith will be the fulfilment of the truth. (487e6-7)

In other words, Socrates apparently believes that the genuine reasoned mutual agreements reached through (properly practised) Socratic argumentation constitute insight into how things really are. As such, the importance of observing the preconditions of such argumentation cannot be stressed too strongly.³

Throughout Gorgias Socrates offers numerous remarks concerning the various preconditions for Socratic argumentation. Taken individually, these remarks may be thought to reveal little; however, taken collectively they become an important source for a proper understanding of this crucial dialectical enterprise. The collation of these remarks is the first major topic here considered. But rather than tackle this collation in piecemeal fashion, it is a useful preliminary to consider a modern perspective of this issue, with an eye towards using this perspective as a framework based on which to consider Socrates's remarks in this vein.

(I.1) Preliminary Conditions For Rational Discourse: A Modern Perspective

In their text Speech Acts in Argumentative Discussions⁴ noted argumentation theorists Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst develop sets of rules designed to govern rational discussion directed towards the resolution of disputes. They there rightly observe, "The resolution of a dispute can be made more difficult if certain preliminary conditions for rational discussions are not satisfied", and add that for the purposes of their own study, "we shall in principle assume that these preliminary conditions have indeed been satisfied". (SA 151) Such an assumption on their part is quite warranted, for the failure of such preliminary conditions to obtain makes genuine reasoned resolution of a dispute, not just "more difficult", but impossible.

Although van Eemeren and Grootendorst do not discuss at length the preliminary conditions they have in mind, they do provide a thorough summation:

we assume the discussants to be ordinary language users in ordinary circumstances, acting of their own volition and seriously, saying what they mean and regarding themselves as committed to what they say, understanding what is said and basing their judgment on it, permitted to adopt any point of
view that they may wish to adopt, and to advance any information that they may consider relevant, saying nothing that they do not consider relevant, permitted to attack any statement that they consider worth criticising, and prepared to defend any statement of their own that may be criticised by other discussants. (SA 151-52)

The preconditions they here mention can be organised into two general categories: first, who may participate in such rational discourse; and second, how such discussants are to participate, that is, what commitments they must accept in order to be legitimate participants in that discourse. The preconditions falling under the first category are such that discussants are to be ordinary language users, in ordinary circumstances, understanding what is said, and basing their judgment on this understanding. However, of primary importance for present purposes are the preconditions falling under the second category, for it is these which summarize the prior attitudes and commitments required of the participants in order for their talk-exchange to bear fruit.

This second set of preconditions can be collected and formalised roughly as follows:

How they participate: discussants are to

a) act of their own volition;
b) (i) act seriously, (ii) say what they mean, and (iii) regard themselves as committed to what they say;
c) (i) attack any statement that they consider worth criticising, and (ii) defend any statement of their own that may be criticised by other discussants;
d) (i) advance any information that they may consider relevant, and (ii) say nothing that they do not consider relevant.

In what follows each of these (sets of) preconditions is considered in turn with respect to its applicability to Socratic argumentation.

(I.2) Preliminary Conditions for Rational Discourse: Plato's Gorgias

In Socratic argumentation discussants provide both positive and critical input. In order for genuine reasoned agreement to result from such argumentation it is essential that discussants be in deadly earnest as they carry out this most crucial enterprise, and it is in this respect that the various preliminary conditions for Socratic argumentation come into play. As just noted, van Eemeren and Grootendorst provide a useful "shopping list", as it were, of preliminary conditions crucial for realization of genuine rational discussion directed towards the reaching of reasoned agreement. As close examination of Gorgias reveals, what Socrates offers during the three discussions contained therein has much in common with these modern guidelines.

a) Discussants are to act of their own volition

Given that Socratic argumentation involves a sincere search for truth, it is imperative that the discussants are part of the conversation by choice rather than by constraint, for coercion would likely compromise sincerity. In his discussions with both Gorgias and Callicles Socrates acknowledges this need. Initial evidence in this vein is found in the passages quoted above in which Socrates tells Gorgias what he is looking for in an interlocutor. There
Socrates twice offers Gorgias the opportunity to withdraw from the discussion, saying first, should Gorgias be the same sort of man as is Socrates

I would gladly question you, but if not, I would let go (458a1-2),

and then again,

if it seems to you we should, let us bid farewell and put an end to the discussion (458b2-3).

Similarly, at one point Callicles begs off. For his part, Socrates thinks the argument ought be completed, and he encourages his interlocutor towards that end. But he is not insistent on this matter; rather, he then adds,

I say these things however, if you believe that it is necessary to bring the discussion to an end. But if you do not wish this, let us forthwith bid farewell [to the discussion] and set forth. (506a6-7)

Socrates thus thrice explicitly expresses willingness to end discussion if his interlocutor so prefers, hence acknowledging the importance of participation in Socratic argumentation being voluntary.

b) Discussants are to (i) act seriously, (ii) say what they mean, and (iii) regard themselves as committed to what they say

Socratic argumentation is an earnest venture, and its participants are to treat it as such in both their deeds and their words. Point b)(i), that discussants are to act seriously, is brought to the fore by Socrates when he suspects Callicles of failing to proceed with appropriate gravity. He there chastises Callicles, exhorting him,

neither ought you to play with me .... nor take me as playing. (500b6-c1)

In similar fashion, when Polus expresses a lack of sobriety by finding one of his views amusing Socrates takes issue with that response, asking,

What is this, Polus? Do you laugh? Is this another form of disapproval, whenever someone should say something, to laugh at them, but not to examine what they say? (473e2-3)

Socratic argumentation is no sport involving ridicule, but rather involves only reasoned examination of one's position.

In order for reasoned agreement to attain truth it must indeed be genuine reasoned agreement; this means that, in accordance with point b)(ii), discussants must say only what they genuinely believe, only what they really mean. Consequently, when Callicles accepts a commitment merely to avoid inconsistency (495a5-6), he is summarily rebuked by Socrates:

You are ruining your first statement, Callicles, and cannot properly examine matters with me if you speak contrary to your beliefs. (495a7-9)

This point Socrates repeats later:

neither ought you to play with me nor should you happen to answer contrary to your beliefs. (500b6-7)
Discussants must mean what they say, for otherwise the end result will not reflect their reasoned views, and hence lack intellectual credibility.

By allowing his interlocutors only to put forward views they themselves mean Socrates concurrently creates a situation in accordance with point b)(iii) such that they are obliged to deem themselves to be committed to what they say. In order to reinforce this commitment Socrates allows his interlocutors considerable leeway to alter their position should they consider it necessary. Hence, when Polus enters discussion on Gorgias's behalf Socrates advises him,

if something seems to you not to have been properly agreed to, I am willing to withdraw whatever you wish (461d2-3),

and then emphasises this point by reiterating,

if you are concerned with the argument which has been stated and you wish to set it aright, then, just as I said just now, retract what you think [ought be removed]. (462a1-3)

In comparable fashion in a later discussion Callicles runs into considerable difficulties, but rather than force him to go down with his position Socrates also offers him the chance to alter his ground. A view Callicles initially asserts is shown to be untenable; he then reverses course, claiming that this earlier assertion was only in play and that he does not really believe it. Rather than hold Callicles to his initial position, Socrates merely shrugs ("Oh oh, Callicles, you are a scoundrel") and moves on:

Now I have been deceived, and, as it seems, I must, in accordance with the old saying, do the best possible and accept this which I am being presented by you. (499c4-6)

Faced with a major shift by his interlocutor, Socrates somewhat resignedly but nonetheless willingly accepts the change of ground and begins anew, clearly recognising that discussants have the right to alter their position should they see fit, however belatedly. To deny them such leeway would be in turn to release them from their commitment to the implications of their earlier assertions.

c) Discussants are to (i) attack any statement that they consider worth criticising, and (ii) defend any statement of their own that may be criticised

In order for Socratic argumentation to reach its goal its participants must have regard for the argument, not for themselves; as such, they must be willing to attack and defend with full enthusiasm, for anything less might lead to the inadvertent acceptance of untruth. Thus Socrates affirms point c)(i) when he encourages Polus to proceed "if you dispute concerning these points" (465a6), and then later adds, "let me state my case and then take hold [and criticize it]" (469c8). Socrates endorses this point even more explicitly in his discussion with Callicles, advising him,

should I seem to you to speak well, agree, but if not, refute me and do not yield (504c5-7),

and then again later,

if what I accept seems to you not to be the case, you must lay hold and refute it (506a1-3),

and then yet once more,
Reluctance on one's part to speak one's mind serves only to undermine the process, and for this reason Socrates encourages all doubts or criticisms to be made explicit.

This joint commitment to the argument carries over to the corollary of point c)(i), point c)(ii), for just as one must be willing to attack, so too one must be willing to defend. For this reason after advising Polus to dispute whatever points he wishes to challenge Socrates continues, "If you dispute these matters, I am willing to submit an account". (465a7) Doing anything less would only work against what they are trying to accomplish.

d) *Discussants are to (i) advance any information that they may consider relevant, and (ii) say nothing that they do not consider relevant.*

Socrates is well aware of the importance of these Gricean criteria contained in d). Although he does not explicitly state point d)(i), he never says anything to deter an interlocutor from putting forth any claim thought to support a position. Point (ii), however, he does address. Socrates realises that the effectiveness of a question-and-answer format will suffer enormously if the respondent's answers are of undue length, and it is for this reason that he demands efficient conversational contributions. He expects answers to be concise rather than lengthy, and tells Gorgias as much: "be willing to answer what is asked in few words" (449b8). For his part Polus rebels against limits upon his answers, asking early on in his discussion with Socrates, "Will it not hold for me to speak as much as I wish?" (461d8-9). Socrates initially slides over this point, but returns to it a few pages later, telling Polus, "If then I am not able to follow your answer, you can stretch out your speech, but if I am able, then follow me [in speaking briefly]; for it is just." (465e6-466a2) Socrates has no qualms with interlocutors advancing whatever is relevant, but he clearly wishes to cut off at the pass speeches whose content is rhetorical rather than substantive.

Socrates's remarks in *Gorgias* do not provide a formal statement of the preconditions of Socratic argumentation, but rather more of a fairly good sketch. As such, it is a mistake to read too much into what he says there, but it is equally a mistake to read too little. It is clearly of significance that of the eight separate points derived from van Eemeren and Grootendorst's brief discussion of the preliminary conditions for rational discourse, six of them, a), b)(i), b)(ii), c)(i), c)(ii), and d)(ii), are explicitly endorsed by Socrates in the dialogue, while the other two, b)(iii) and d)(i), are implicitly affirmed. It is thus apparent that in its essentials Socratic argumentation imposes demands very similar to those of modern argumentation with respect to the prior attitudes and commitments required of legitimate participants in those activities.

(II) Socrates and Socratic Argumentation

The theory of argumentation outlined by Socrates has great promise. It demands considerable commitment and skill from its participants, but it also holds great rewards for those who see it through in appropriate fashion. But while as the "father" of Socratic argumentation Socrates might reasonably be expected to be its foremost practitioner, the paragon of rationality and impartiality in a relentless search for truth, late in *Gorgias* certain charges are laid which seem to belie this idyllic image. The high-water mark of the dialogue is clearly Socrates's extended discussion with Callicles. However, in the course of this discussion Callicles makes numerous charges which throw doubt on Socrates's suitability as a participant in genuine Socratic argumentation, for he accuses Socrates of many qualities which fly in the face of those preconditions for Socratic argumentation identified in the last section. Callicles charges that Socrates speaks impetuously, indeed acts like a mob orator who harangues his
audience (482c4-5); that he cheats through language (483a2-3); that he preys upon errant speech (489b7-c1); that he dissembles (489e1); again that he is a mob orator (494d1); that he speaks contrary to his beliefs (495b1); that he coerces (505d4); that he twists arguments to and fro (511a4-5); that he is a lover of victory (515b5). (This last charge is perhaps the most cutting of the lot, for it is this exact claim which Socrates makes early on (457d1-5) against the common sort of disputants with whom he wishes to contrast himself.) How, if at all, can such charges be reconciled with what Socrates says throughout the dialogue?

An answer to this question can only be drawn after careful examination of the circumstances surrounding these accusations. In some cases such examination proves fruitless, for a few of Callicles's charges come during long speeches on his part, with the result that they get lost in the tide and do not receive direct responses from Socrates; it is for this reason that his claims at 482c4-5 and 483a2-3 cannot be adequately assessed. However, the bulk of Callicles's accusations do receive Socrates's attention, and these are considered each in turn below.

Socrates preys upon errant speech (489b7-c1)

Callicles's assertion that Socrates "preys upon" (thêreuô, 'to hunt, run down') errant speech clashes with preconditions b)(i) and b)(ii), for it involves an accusation that Socrates intentionally fails to act in a serious manner by frivolously pursuing an irrelevant line of argument. Callicles's charge arises after Socrates has successfully demonstrated a flaw in his position; to this Callicles responds by attacking Socrates, complaining,

Will this man not stop playing the fool? Tell me, Socrates, are you not ashamed to prey upon words at such an age, and if someone should speak mistakenly, hold this to be a godsend? (489b7-c1)

Callicles thus claims that rather than work cooperatively with his interlocutor to forward the discussion, Socrates instead trifles with him by deliberately misconstruing what he says. After Callicles angrily clarifies his position Socrates belatedly responds to his charge by attacking Socrates, complaining,

And I myself, my good sir, also guessed earlier that you meant some such thing by 'the stronger', and I ask repeatedly in my struggle to know clearly what you mean. (489d1-3)

Socrates thus essentially defends himself by asserting that he sincerely pursues a mistaken interpretation of Callicles's position in order to assure himself that it is indeed a mistaken interpretation. But of course he could just as (if not more) easily accomplish this same end simply by asking Callicles directly if what he understood him to mean was correct. Consequently, while technically tenable, Socrates's defence here that he is not acting inappropriately, but rather is seriously exploring a relevant potential position, is suspect.

Socrates dissembles (489e1)

Callicles's claim that Socrates "dissembles" (eirôneuomai, esp. 'to feign ignorance') also accuses him of violating preconditions b)(i) and b)(ii), for if Socrates is indeed failing to act in accordance with what he really knows he is neither acting sincerely nor saying what he means. This charge follows immediately after Socrates's explanation why he pursued the incorrect meaning of Callicles's position. Socrates ends that passage by imploring Callicles to explain once more what he means, ending his request by adding, "And, wondrous one, teach me gently, in order that I will not depart from your guidance [prematurely]." (489d7-8) It is in response to this seemingly obviously ironical remark that Callicles lays his charge, "You dissemble, Socrates". (489e1)

To this accusation Socrates in turn replies,
By Zethus, Callicles, you who was just now making much use of dissemblance towards me! But come now and tell me what you mean by 'the better'. (489e2-4)

By responding in this way Socrates does not deny Callicles's charge, but rather implies that he does indeed "return the favour" of acting in this manner. But while in many circumstances such behaviour would be both understandable and justified, in the context of Socratic argumentation it is neither. Failure of Socrates's interlocutor to act in accordance with the preconditions of proper Socratic discourse does not in turn relieve him of his duty to their adherence. As a result, in this case it appears that Socrates concedes himself guilty of dissemblance, and hence of failing to observe preconditions b)(i) and b)(ii).

Socrates is a mob orator (494d1)

Callicles's first charge (482c4-5) that Socrates is a "mob orator" (dêmêgoros, 'one who harangues the people') gets lost in the shuffle; however, its second appearance catches Socrates's attention. Socrates pushes Callicles's defence of hedonism to the brink by asking whether one who scratches incessantly can be said to live happily; it is in response to this line of arguing that Callicles responds, "You are absurd, Socrates, an artless mob orator" (494d1), a charge which once more claims violation of preconditions b)(i) and b)(ii), for it implies that Socrates says whatever will win the day without regard for whether he means it.

As with the previous charge, this accusation Socrates also does not deny. On the contrary, he also implicitly affirms it, in this case using it as a(n unstated) premise for his reply:

Wherefore, Callicles, I intimidated Polus and Gorgias and caused them to feel shamed, but you will not be intimidated or shamed; for you are courageous. (494d2-4)

Socrates thus does not reject Callicles's charge, but rather acts as if it were true, and then plays up to Callicles by telling him that he is aware that such a tactic will not work on him. Such a move is presumably a ploy intended to prompt Callicles to develop further the position he is putting forth, and under ordinary circumstances, including ordinary dialectical disputation, such strategy is perfectly acceptable. However, Socratic argumentation is clearly not intended to be ordinary dialectical disputation, but rather is a carefully structured activity regulated by specific guidelines. As such, Socrates's actions must be measured by this higher standard, and, once again, they appear not to measure up. If Socrates does indeed use shame and intimidation as tools in his discussions with Gorgias and Polus then he is not proceeding according to the preconditions he sets down for his interlocutors, preconditions which apply to himself as well. And if he does not use these tactics as tools, then his implication that he does itself constitutes verification of Callicles's charge, for it reaffirms that Socrates will indeed say whatever achieves his immediate goal without regard for whether he means it. Either way, preconditions b)(i) and b)(ii) have been bent once more.

Socrates speaks contrary to his beliefs (495b1)

Callicles's assertion that Socrates speaks contrary to his beliefs, thus allegedly violating precondition b)(ii), cuts to the heart of Socratic argumentation, for sincerity on the part of the participants is essential if the resultant conclusion is to be at all significant. The charge arises when Socrates criticises Callicles for self-admittedly answering a question a certain way solely to remain consistent, chastising, "You are ruining your first statement, Callicles, and cannot properly examine matters with me if you speak contrary to your beliefs." (495a7-9) It is in this context that Callicles responds, "As [do] you also, Socrates." (495b1)
In now familiar fashion, once more, Socrates does not deny this accusation; instead, he simply reaffirms the error of such behaviour, no matter who performs it:

So then neither do I act rightly, if I do this, nor you. (495b2-3)

He then fails to elaborate this point, choosing instead to pursue further Callicles's views concerning the nature of pleasure. It is certainly a step in the right direction for Socrates to admit that if he does indeed speak contrary to his beliefs then he is not acting rightly. However, this is a far cry from his denying that he does so. Given the enormous importance for the success of Socratic argumentation that its participants participate with full sincerity, this response on Socrates's part to such an important accusation is again far from adequate. Charged with violating precondition b)(ii), perhaps the most fundamental of all of the preconditions of Socratic argumentation, Socrates simply moves on with nary a word in his own defence.

Socrates is coercive (505d4)

Callicles's complaint that Socrates is "coercive" (biaios, 'forcible, violent') fits in with the larger issue of precondition a), for it alleges that through coercive behaviour Socrates undermines the voluntary nature of the whole enterprise. By 505b Socrates has once again refuted one of Callicles's positions, at which point Callicles suddenly claims not to understand what Socrates is getting at, and attempts to divest himself of his role in the discussion. Socrates then asks if they ought break off the discussion, but adds that even stories should not be left incomplete, and urges Callicles, "Then also give the remaining answers, in order that our argument should lay hold of a head." (505d2-3) But Callicles has no interest in doing this, and so he responds,

You are coercive, Socrates. If you should be persuaded by me, you will bid farewell to this argument, or else you should discuss with another. (505d4-5)

Having had an earlier effort to withdraw undercut by Gorgias (497bb3-c2), Callicles's second attempt in this direction is now accompanied by a personal attack on Socrates. However, Socrates's response to this attack is to offer to let Callicles off the hook: as noted in the last section, he urges that they finish the discussion, but adds, "But if you do not wish this, let us forthwith bid farewell and set forth". (506a7) It is only Gorgias's subsequent second intervention (506a8-b3) which prevents discussion from ending and convinces Callicles to continue. Consequently, Socrates is not literally coercive; on the contrary, he explicitly offers to respect the importance of participation in Socratic argumentation being a voluntary affair. But while on the one hand Socrates is thus innocent of Callicles's charge, on the other hand he is well aware that Callicles's participation in the discussion has been compromised. After Gorgias's intervention Socrates continues, "But since you, Callicles, are not willing to fulfill the argument together, then at least listen and challenge me, if I seem to you not to speak well" (506b6-c1), to which Callicles replies, "Speak, good man, and complete [the argument] yourself." (506c4) Socrates thus knows that Callicles is no longer a full participant in their discussion, indeed, that their dialogue has been reduced to a monologue accompanied by a reluctant respondent. Moreover, many of Callicles's subsequent replies serve to underscore the extent to which he ceases to be an active participant in the discussion, for they serve merely to allow Socrates to proceed, not to challenge him: "Let this be so for you, Socrates, in order that you may bring your argument to an end" (510a1-2); "Let it be so for you, if you wish" (513e1); "Certainly, if it pleases you" (514a4); "Certainly, in order that I shall oblige you." (516b4) Given these circumstances, one may reasonably question whether Socrates is right to have proceeded at this point. He has a commitment to the argument, a commitment which thus far remains unfulfilled; however, it is a mutual commitment to the argument which was asserted, and that mutual commitment is no more. The original contract can no longer be met, no matter how he proceeds, and hence the nature of his activity ceases to be what it was.
Socrates twists arguments to and fro (511a4-5)

Callicles's claim that Socrates keeps twisting the argument back and forth is one of the least significant he offers, for this remark stems, not from Socrates's failure to observe the rules of Socratic argumentation, but rather from Callicles's frustration that Socrates's conclusions continually assert the opposite of what Callicles believes to be the case. In this instance Socrates offers an observation which Callicles finds much to his liking ("You see, Socrates, that I am prepared to praise, should you say something appropriate" (510a11-b1)); however, when Socrates develops his line of reasoning, it ends up other than where Callicles thinks it ought, thus provoking his accusation that Socrates twists the argument. At times Socrates and Callicles do agree, for they often concur on selected facts; however, they usually then differ on what those facts mean, what one ought conclude based on those premises. For Callicles to claim that Socrates's reading matters differently than he himself does constitutes "twisting the argument" is little more than sour grapes on his part.

Socrates is a lover of victory (515b5)

As noted above, Callicles's claim that Socrates is a "lover of victory" (philonikos, 'striver for victory') is perhaps the most galling of his various charges, for it is this exact term which Socrates applies to the disputatious eristics whom he dismisses early on in his discussion with Gorgias, and which he explicitly contrasts with being a genuine "investigator of the matter under discussion". This charge does not allege violation of any particular precondition of Socratic argumentation so much as it alleges violation of the activity as a whole. Socrates has expressly billed himself as one who is "not more annoyed to be refuted than to refute", and indeed asserted that this attitude, love of truth rather than victory, is key to the whole enterprise. Consequently, an accusation that he is a lover of victory after all threatens to undermine him more than any other claim.

Callicles's attribution of this term to Socrates arises in a situation in which Socrates proposes as a general rule, and Callicles agrees, that one putting oneself forward for a public position ought be able to point to instances in which one has in private successfully plied the skills relevant to that position. (514a5-e10) Since, then, Callicles is himself now entering public political life, Socrates challenges him on this same criterion:

Tell me, if someone should scrutinize you on these points, Callicles, what would you say? What man would you claim to have made better due to his being in your company? Do you hesitate to answer, if indeed there is some such deed you have accomplished already as a private citizen, before attempting to lead a public life? (515a7-b4)

It is in this context, faced with public defeat on this admittedly significant point, that Callicles retorts, "You are a lover of victory, Socrates." (515b5)

Surprisingly, despite the legitimacy of his line of questioning, and thus the unfairness of Callicles's response, Socrates's response (once more) does not explicitly deny Callicles's accusation. Socrates replies to Callicles by saying,

I do not ask due to love of victory, but because of truly wishing to know in what manner you think one ought to take part in our governance.(515b6-8)

Socrates thus denies specifically that he asks his question due to love of victory, but he does not deny more generally that he himself is a lover of victory, which is what Callicles has charged. Consequently, as with Callicles's charges that Socrates dissembles, is a mob orator, and speaks counter to his beliefs, so too here
Socrates’s failure specifically to deny the accusation in question, while not implying that he admits what Callicles says, hardly serves to provide a solid foundation for his defence.

The end result of this examination is that the case on Socrates’s behalf is less than impressive. No less than four of Callicles’s charges—that Socrates dissembles, that he is a mob orator, that he speaks contrary to his beliefs, and that he loves victory—remain unrefuted, if not inferred, thus building a strong circumstantial case against Socrates as a proper participant in Socratic argumentation. While Callicles’s charge that Socrates is coercive does not hold directly, Socrates is clearly aware that his interlocutor is no longer participating voluntarily, and he does nothing to alter the situation. The final tally is revealing. Of the six preliminary conditions for rational discourse proposed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst and explicitly endorsed by Socrates in the course of *Gorgias*, three of the most important Socrates either apparently violates himself—b)(i), that discussants are to act seriously, and b)(ii), that discussants are to say what they mean—or knowingly allows to be violated by someone else—a), that discussants are to act of their own volition. All in all, not a very impressive performance by one so willing to tell others how they ought act.

(III) Does Socrates Engage in Socratic Argumentation?

In *Gorgias* Socrates offers a wide variety of interrelated remarks concerning how one is to act if one is to qualify as a legitimate participant in genuine Socratic argumentation. Unlike the eristic disputation representative of popular culture, Socratic argumentation demands that discussants meet specified preliminary conditions, particular prior attitudes and commitments necessary if they are to reach their desired dialectical goal. As discussed in Section I, these preconditions fall into four main areas. First, discussants are to be involved voluntarily, to act only of their own volition. Second, discussants are to be completely sincere, acting seriously, saying what they mean and regarding themselves as committed to what they say. Third, discussants are to spare no quarter, attacking any statement that they consider worth criticising and defending any statement of their own that may be criticised. Fourth, discussants are to give themselves free reign to advance any information that they may consider relevant, but concurrently to demonstrate self-restraint and say nothing that they do not consider relevant. To sum up, legitimate participants engaging in proper Socratic argumentation are to make every effort to advance the argument in order that they might reach genuine, reasoned, mutual agreement on the topic at issue.

But does Socrates himself live up to these preconditions which he documents so well? Callicles seem to think that he does not, for he accuses Socrates of a variety of offenses which question both his methods and his motives. As discussed in Section II, Callicles’s charges are of varying strengths. His assertion that Socrates twists arguments is little more than the whining of a defeated contestant. However, his claims that Socrates preys upon errant speech and that he is a lover of victory, while not devastating, are nonetheless troubling. But it is Callicles’s four remaining charges which do the most damage to Socrates’s reputation. The claim that Socrates coerces, while not directly applicable, draws attention to the fact that Socrates knowingly allows, indeed, helps cause Callicles to continue to participate long after his desire to do so has evaporated. More tellingly, Callicles’s claims that Socrates dissembles, harangues, and speaks contrary to his beliefs all have some measure of support, thus significantly undermining the sincerity of Socrates’s commitment to the successful completion of their dialectical enterprise.

One might attempt to explain away this behaviour on Socrates’s part simply by considering that, as the above clearly reveals, Socratic argumentation involves a difficult balance. On the one hand, one is committed to
reaching reasoned agreement with one's interlocutor; on the other hand, one is also committed to the discussion itself, distinct from its participant discussants. The situation with which Socrates is faced in Gorgias concerns what one is to do when these two commitments conflict due to a failure on the part of one's interlocutor, for it is clear that in the end Callicles prefers abandoning their discussion to acknowledging the realities of his admissions. It is with such a situation in mind that, for example, T. H. Irwin argues that Plato's goal in Gorgias is to demonstrate that conversational argument can be rationally compelling without being illegitimately coercive.5 But by placing stress solely on commitment to the discussion, Irwin reduces one's commitment to reaching reasoned agreement with one's interlocutor to no commitment at all, but rather simply a preference, an approach which entirely undermines the activity of Socratic argumentation. In a recent paper Jyl Gentzler adopts a more extreme defence of Socrates, contending that he does indeed employ "Sophistic tricks" in his discussion with Callicles, but he does so in order to demonstrate that he engages in philosophy rather than rhetoric by choice rather than inability, and hence that this behaviour is only employed to prove a point.6 But even if Gentzler is correct on this, this does not change the fact that the preconditions of Socratic argumentation do not allow for such behaviour; rather, they require Socrates to treat Callicles properly, and also to allow him, should he so choose, to walk away. Socrates's desire to see the argument through leads him to try to have it both ways, to complete the argument with Callicles despite Callicles's reluctance to do so. It is for this reason that Socrates employs a variety of questionable techniques to spur Callicles forward, and, when even these are no longer enough, nominally offers to let Callicles go while concurrently incorporates him into the argument's conclusion despite his protestations against such involvement. Such behaviour on Socrates's part may be understandable, but it is also nonetheless unacceptable; by acting as he does Socrates reveals that he is not, after all, quite the "sort of man" he claims to be.

Nothing that Socrates says or does conclusively demonstrates that he acts in violation of the preconditions for Socratic argumentation which he lays down in the course of the dialogue. However, as discussed above, on a variety of occasions it certainly appears that he engages in illicit behaviour, and when he is accused of as much, rather than defend himself he chooses instead merely to use the accusations as springboards and stepping-stones to further debate. Such behaviour might be tactically sound, but it serves to leave his own role in doubt. Does Socrates genuinely engage in Socratic argumentation? Despite one's desire to respond in the affirmative, the circumstantial evidence suggests that in the end Socrates allows himself to become something akin to those disputatious contestants he reproaches in his conversation with Gorgias. Although (hopefully) well-intentioned, Socrates's desire to see through the matter under discussion leads him to adopt tactics for which his own method of Socratic argumentation has no place.

Notes


2. All translations from Gorgias are my own, and are based on the Oxford text edited by E.R. Dodds.

3. It is, of course, an enormous leap on Socrates's part to hold that genuine reasoned agreements between two discussants constitute truth, no matter who those discussants may be. This matter is not pursued here. Those interested in exploring this issue are advised to begin with Vlastos's important paper, "The Socratic Elenchus" (Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 1, reprinted with revisions in his book Socratic Studies (Cambridge
University Press, 1994)), and with the papers it has prompted in response.


5. "In the *Gorgias* Plato argues that Socrates' ambition for dialectic is reasonable; if the premises are appropriately selected, the conclusions are justifiably believed both to be true and to be compelling for the rational inquirer who is also the rational agent." (*Coercion and Objectivity in Plato's Dialectic," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* No 156-157, 1986."

6. "On Callicles's view, the fact that Socrates spends most of his life doing philosophy can only mean that he is inferior at other pursuits, and at Sophistic rhetoric in particular .... By demonstrating that he is a competent rhetor, capable of Sophistic tricks when the situation demands it, Socrates provides him with evidence that he has embraced the just and temperate life engaged in philosophy, not because he is incapable of applying the techniques of the Sophistic rhetor for unjust ends, but because he genuinely believes that the just and temperate life engaged in philosophy is the best life of all." (*The Sophistic Cross-Examination of Callicles in the Gorgias," *Ancient Philosophy* v 15, 1995.

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