

'GORGIAS' – STUDY GUIDE (BASIC READING: PENGUIN EDITION PP.32-54 AND 104-113)

BACKGROUND: Written in about 387, after the death of Socrates, but set in 427, during the visit to Athens of the aged Gorgias and Polus, from Sicily. Callicles is an Athenian aristocrat. Rhetoric is the art of public speaking, taught to young men by the sophists. It is comparable to a barristers' skill, advertising, party politicals, spin doctoring and job interviews. Behind it lies a belief that morality is relative, merely a matter of convention (*nomos*), and that the aim of life is power and pleasure, achieved by persuasion.

SOCRATES: He was in his prime at this time. He engages in interrogation of people's views (his *elenchos*), which he insists must be sincerely held. He passionately believes in virtue, but always protests his ignorance of true wisdom. His aim is for people to follow the oracle's advice to 'know yourself'. He argues for 'moral egoism' - that virtue is in your own interest, because it brings a healthy soul. He is opposed to the view that pleasure is the good, and believes that all desire is guided by belief, so that all wickedness results from ignorance, and weakness of will (*akrasia*) is impossible.

A. GORGIAS CLAIMS THAT RHETORIC IS THE HIGHEST SKILL

			<u>Discussion</u>
1. <u>Rhetoric is amoral</u>	<i>Election of doctors</i>	456b,459a	
Rhetoricians deny responsibility for their pupils' acts		460d	
Clearly some pupils still behave immorally	<i>Boxing 456d</i>	460e	
2. <u>Rhetoric is not a proper skill (techné)</u>		465a-e	
It lacks a proper subject matter		465a-e	
It is not a rational activity		465a,501a	
It is analogous to cookery and ornamentation	<i>Helmsmanship 511d</i>	465c	

B. POLUS CLAIMS THAT RHETORICIANS ARE SUPREME POWERFUL

3. <u>Rhetoricians are not really powerful</u>		466b	
Power gets what you want, not what you judge best	<i>Tyrants, dagger 469d</i>	466b-468d	Jocasta, the dentist
Rhetoric is a neutral means, and may not get the end you want		468a	
4. <u>It is better to be wronged than to do wrong</u>		469c	
Doing wrong is obviously more contemptible than being wronged		474c	At 482c, Callicles says Polus should never have conceded this
Contemptible things are either unpleasant or harmful	<i>Good physique 474d</i>	474d-475a	
Doing wrong is more pleasant than suffering it, so it must be more harmful		475b	Harmful for the doer, or for the victim?
Therefore doing wrong is worse than suffering wrong		475c	

C. POLUS SAYS WE ADMIRE ARCHELAUS FOR GETTING AWAY WITH HIS CRIMES

5. <u>It is better to be punished than to get away with crime</u>	<i>Torture 473c</i>	472e	
If punishment is administered justly, the culprit receives justice		476d	
Punishment is unpleasant, so it must bring a benefit		477a	
The benefit must be to the mind (like medicine for the body)		477a	
		492c	

D. CALLICLES SAYS THE GOOD IS SELF-INDULGENCE AND PERSONAL PLEASURE

6. <u>Pleasure is not the good</u>			
Power is mainly used to achieve justice, not personal pleasure	<i>The mob want equality 489a</i>	489a	
Morality is natural (<i>physis</i>), not just conventional (<i>nomos</i>)	<i>Food distribution 490c</i>	489b	Cf. 482e
Pleasure is an insatiable tyrant	<i>Leaky jar 493b</i>	493b	
Some pleasures are obviously bad, and can't be good	<i>Scratching and prostitution</i>	494c,494e	
Some people are obviously bad, although they obtain a lot of pleasure	<i>Cowards 498b</i>	498a	
Quenching thirst makes us happy as the pleasure fades	<i>Drinking 497c</i>	497c-d	
Intelligent pleasures are better than thoughtless pleasures		501e	
7. <u>The good consists of virtues, not pleasures</u>			
Benefit and welfare are good, rather than pleasure			
The benefit is an organised, healthy and controlled mind		506e-507a	477a? 479b?
Justice is innately good			
Appropriate behaviour is always desirable		507a	
Co-operation and friendship are good in themselves		507e	
In politics we should lead the people, not follow them	<i>Pericles 515d-516d</i>	517b	

Table showing why rhetoric is not a true *techné* (see 464b-466a):

	Expertise (<i>techné</i>)	Impersonates	Knack/Flattery
Body	Exercise	←	Ornamentation
	Medicine	←	Cookery
Mind (Statesmanship)	Legislation	←	Rhetoric
	Justice	←	Sophistry
Status:	Rational		Irrational
Aim:	Welfare		Pleasure