

## **Socrates Argument Against Hedonism In The Gorgias**

By: Marcus Alexander

The description of Socrates on trial in *The Apology* gives a deep insight into the framework of philosophy that Socrates practices throughout the *Gorgias*. In *The Apology* when Socrates was charged he does not simply defend himself but the manner of which he practices philosophy. Socrates began philosophy because the oracle of Delphi told Chaerephon no one is wiser than Socrates. Socrates did not believe this to be the case since he believed he knew people are wiser than him. He tries to refute what the oracle says, approaching the wisest men, to only find out the people he thought were wise were not wise at all. Socrates then interprets that his duty is to interrogate people in general, not just wise people, but all people. If they protest he will reproach again. The overall goal was to bring their beliefs closer to knowledge and make them the wiser for it. A person's beliefs being close to true knowledge only benefits the individual. Being successfully refuted should be considered a good thing and should be welcome; successful refutation brings one's beliefs closer to true knowledge. Having beliefs close to true knowledge will result in a good life. The practice to bring one's beliefs close to true knowledge is also known as the elenchus. The elenchus is the cross examination of one's beliefs, normally consisting amongst two or more people (interlocutors) where the beliefs they hold are questioned and refuted. While the elenchus can be conducted by oneself internally, it should be practiced amongst people. The term elenchus is a contemporary term that philosophers named the practice, it is not the term that Socrates called it. The end goal of the elenchus and philosophy is to question one's belief and bring them as close to true knowledge. While not all people need to spend the entirety of their days performing the elenchus, Socrates believes that this action should be to an extent intertwined in the people's life. The successful practice of the elenchus and philosophy is how one reaches eudaimonia in life according to Socrates. Eudaimonia is a Greek term that best translates to happiness, but instead of a subjective meaning that typically accompanies the term of happiness, eudaimonia carries an objective meaning. One can either reach eudaimonia in life or not, subjectivity does not play a large role. The elenchus is conducted between Callicles and Socrates in the *Gorgias* when discussing the practice of Hedonism. The discussion of Socrates and Callicles on Hedonism is conducted in the later portion of the text. The conversation of Hedonism stems from preceding conversation of what "stronger" and "better" means in the context of a person's actions [488b2 491d3].

Socrates starts off this conversation asking Callicles for confirmation on his earlier claim that the stronger have the natural right to dominate the weak [488b2]. Callicles affirms this is indeed his belief. Socrates then seeks to understand if Callicles' use of "better" is synonymous with his definition of "stronger"; Callicles too agrees with this point. Upon the establishment of these two points Socrates then implies, with Callicles agreeing, naturally stronger individuals should (will) rule over the weak. Socrates then claims that by stronger meaning better, then two men must be better than one or a slave must be better than an owner since they are physically

stronger. Upon this claim Callicles shifts his definition of "better" as not simply physically "stronger" but instead people that are more "noble"[489e]. Socrates moves on to dissecting the semantics and implications of this new claim but eventually it ends with Callicles claiming that his definition who should be the rulers of people should be those who "are intelligent in the city's affairs and have courage" [490d].

Callicles' claim of what entitles rulers to have power inspires Socrates' advocacy of self mastery. Socrates' account of self mastery directly builds his argument against hedonism. Self mastery is brought up due to Callicles neglecting to address if being a master of oneself is also important. Socrates asks if mastery over others supersedes self mastery. Socrates' explanation of self mastery is the belief "of being moderate and in control of oneself and master of one's own passions and appetite" [491a-c]. Callicles goes on to say that the people that Socrates calls "moderate" are actually "half witted". He further claims that "the man who's going to live as a man ought should encourage his appetites to be as strong as possible instead of repressing them" [491e]. The same man, if his intelligence and courage permits, should have the ability to satisfy his desires. Callicles builds upon this point with the bold claim that not only is giving in to one's appetite good for the individual, but it directly is a virtue and happiness [492c]. This means that fulfillment of appetite leads to a eudemonistic life. With such a concrete claim Socrates then implies that this means under Callicles claims that those who do not have any wants must be unhappy— Socrates does not believe this. We see with this conversation, Callicles believes that the fulfillment of one's appetite is not only possible but will in turn lead to a good life. The unrestrained pursuit of fulfilling the appetite of one's desires that Callicles outlines is hedonism.

At this point in the dialogue Socrates brings up that the pursuit of fulfilling one's desires is like trying to fill a pitcher with holes in it. Socrates states that the part of the soul that contains the appetite is analogous to a pitcher with holes in it. Trying to fill the pitcher only results in leakage. The pitcher will be unable to be filled and despite how much effort is allocated to achieving such a feat, there will be more room to fill. After adequate explanation of the analogy Socrates then shifts to directly addressing Callicles. Socrates explicitly states "I want to prove to you, to persuade you, if I can, to change your mind, and, instead of a life of intemperate craving which can never be satisfied, to choose an ordered life which is content with whatever comes to hand and asks no more" [493d]. Upon completion of this plea Socrates then asks if what was said influenced Callicles to change his beliefs or despite the number of attempts he undergoes they will be futile. Callicles does not concede that his beliefs are changed but does state that for the sake of conversation he wants to hear the rest of the argument that Socrates seeks to lay out.

Socrates attempts to provide another example that could persuade Callicles. The example provided is one of two lives, one of the people is representative of a temperate life and the other an intemperate life. Both of the people have casks that they fill with commodities (milk, wine, honey, etc.). As the commodities are scarce both men go through great difficulty to fill these casks. The casks of the temperate life are sturdy and do not have any leakage. The man will go through no additional troubles as his casks are full and will sustain him; His mind is at rest. The casks of the intemperate man are leaky and rotten. The intemperate man has to contentiously go

through the difficulty to fill these casks; He is perpetually troubled. Socrates then asks Callicles, “Can you say the life of the intemperate man is happier than the life of the temperate man? Am I making any progress towards making you admit that the temperate life is better than the intemperate, or not?”[494a]. Callicles responds “No, Socrates you are not. The man who has filled his casks no longer has any pleasure left; once his casks are filled he lives like a stone, with no more pleasure and pain.”[494b]. Callicles believes that the pursuit of fulfilling one’s appetite results in the good of life; once the pursuit is not being undertaken the pleasure of life is gone. Socrates asks if this means a life of pleasure would mean a happy life, asking Callicles “And if pleasant then happy?” [494d]. Callicles establishes that this is indeed his belief. A happy life would mean a eudemonistic life. This establishes the link between pleasure and good in Callicles beliefs.

With Socrates failing to change Callicles' mind that the hedonistic pursuit of appetite is not good, he then attempts to show Callicles that pleasure and good are not identical. Socrates attempts to refute Callicles' claim that good and pleasure are the same thing. Socrates claims that good and happiness cannot be in the same place and time as evil and misery but pleasure and pain can. The connection of pleasure and pain existing at the same time would prove that it is not the same thing as good and evil, since if it were, it would not be able to exist at the same time and place. Socrates and Callicles in their dialogue agree that both good and happiness and evil and misery are acquired by turns and lost by turns; If there were to be a pair of opposites that are lost or possessed together it will undoubtedly not be good and evil [496c]. With Callicles believing this, Socrates claims that the example of drinking when thirsty would imply the experience of pleasure and pain together which was previously implied by Callicles could not exist — Callicles is not aware that he implied this. Drinking when thirsty implies the existence of pleasure and pain at the same time since, when a person is thirsty they are experiencing pain and desire but when they take a drink, they then experience pleasure and enjoyment. With pleasure being a good, this would make drinking a good, and as a result an evil and good would be possessed together by turns. This highlights a contradiction in Callicles' claim that pleasure and good are not identical. Callicles never concedes his point for the sake of not being wrong.

Socrates makes an additional attempt to show Callicles that pleasure and good are not identical by explaining how people of differing traits (ie. the fool vs the intellect or the coward vs the brave) have a similar capacity for feeling pleasure and pain. Socrates' argument for this point is that by calling someone good it is implied the presence of good is within them. Therefore, the brave and intelligent are good. Similarly, the fool and the coward are bad. They both display the traits of what they are. However, Socrates claims that the fool has the capacity to feel pleasure as does the intelligent man has the capacity to experience pain. Along the same thought process, in a war the coward and the brave man both experience joy when the enemy retreats. Conversely, when an enemy advances both the brave man and coward experience pain similarly. The traits of the person does not hinder the ability to feel pleasure or pain. Socrates takes issue with this thought process. With Callicles maintaining the belief that the good owe their goodness to the good that is within them and the bad for the presence of evil within them, then in moments that

might alter what the good or the bad feel, then it would imply that the values attributed to them must change as well. For instance, when the brave man is attacked in war and feels pain, he is no longer good because he is brave but instead bad because he is brave. Callicles, taking issue with Socrates' claim, indicates that he believes that there is a distinction between "better and worse pleasures"[499c]. Good pleasures are those that bring benefit and bad pleasures are those that bring harm [499d]. Callicles also holds that only an expert is able to distinguish the difference between the pleasures [500]. This marks a small concession that Callicles makes during Socrates' line of questioning, but regardless in the end he does not concede his overall argument; He still believes that pleasure is good and hedonism is a beneficial practice.

Throughout the conversation between Callicles and Socrates, neither of them successfully refute the other. In *The Gorgias*, we see the elenchus being conducted between Socrates and Callicles when discussing how to live a good life. In the end of the dialogue Socrates claims that the best way to live a good life is by pursuing the truth [536e] and while he might not have absolute knowledge of how to live a good life his beliefs stood the test of the elenchus. Therefore, from what Socrates states, he does not believe that Callicles' argument of hedonism was compelling enough to change his point of view. We know from earlier in the *Gorgias* Socrates hopes to be refuted claiming that "being refuted [is] a greater good" [458a]. We must believe while he hoped that Callicles could outline an argument that could change his beliefs, not enough evidence was provided. Socrates states that Callicles was unable to produce an argument that showed a better way of life than the one he laid out [527a]. Even though Socrates claims that his beliefs are indeed correct, this does not mean that he successfully refuted Callicles. Although Callicles made a number of concessions, he never did admit it. He attempted to portray that when he did change his ground, it was what he believed the whole time. In the end we can only evaluate both Socrates and Callicles' argument but not be sure which is correct.