*This is a script for an academic talk that I delivered for an audience of specialists in Ancient Greek Philosophy at the Rackham Interdisciplinary Workshop in Ancient Philosophy at the University of Michigan, October 2020*

“The Divine Law of Temperance in Plato’s *Gorgias*”

**Introduction**

This talk develops a new interpretation of the virtue of temperance in the *Gorgias*. I advance two principle claims. The first is that Socrates defends a conception of temperance as the political virtue of obedience to law. The second claim concerns the law to which the temperate person is obedient. As I argue, it is a divine law, as distinct from the positive law of some πόλις. Nevertheless this divine law retains a connection to the πόλις. For Socrates’ expert politician, who practices the πολιτικὴ τέχνη or craft of politics, regards his purpose to be to promulgate this divine law to his fellow citizens, so that the πόλις may live under it.

So far as I have been able to tell, no such account of temperance has been proposed in Anglophone scholarship.[[1]](#footnote-1) Scholars discuss temperance, and virtue more generally, without any reference to law. Instead, they describe temperance as the ethical or moral virtue of restraining one’s desires, or imposing rational order on one’s desires. But, as I hope to persuade you, any such view is at best incomplete, if it does not mention that it is law, indeed a divine law, which orders and restrains the desires of the temperate person. Now, I’m not going to discuss this standard scholarly account of temperance, as rational ordering of desire, any more in the paper that I will be delivering today. I would if I had more time, and I’d be happy to field questions about it in the Q&A. But I hope you will indulge the following justification for my decision to jump straight into my own interpretation: the only way I could explain what is wrong with the standard account, is to point out the evidence that supports my own reading, which holds that it is law which orders the temperate person’s desires. In what follows, then, I will catalogue the evidence for my view.

The crux of my interpretation will be a lengthy passage at *Gorgias* 500a-508a. This passage is the final phase of a long dialectic between Socrates and Callicles with three stages, and I’ll begin by walking you through a little map of that dialectic, which you can find on the handout under the section titled ‘Introduction.’ The argument concerns temperance. It begins with what I call Phase A at 491d, where Callicles denies that temperance is a virtue, on the grounds that (i) virtue makes us happy and (ii) temperance makes unhappy. Callicles recommends intemperance, a regime of unbridled service to the appetites, as the means to happiness. In response to this Socrates undertakes a defense of temperance which spans phases B and C on the handout Map. In Phase B, Socrates targets and refutes the Calliclean conception of happiness; then, in Phase C, Socrates establishes temperance as a virtue, together with an alternative conception of happiness consistent with it. The arguments about happiness in this dialectic will not matter to us. What will matter is the way in which Socrates characterizes temperance and virtue in phase C: that’s the stretch of text on which my interpretation will mostly be based.

In the course of phase C, Socrates makes three principle claims, also listed on the handout Map. First he offers a generic definition of virtue as the ‘proper order’ of a thing, its οἰκεῖος κόσμος. Second, he tells us that the name of this proper order is ‘law’ or ‘lawful,’ (νόμος or τὸ νόμιμον). And third, he identifies the virtue of temperance with the ‘proper order’ and ‘law' of the soul. What I’m going to do next is walk us through these steps of Phase C. I’ll give a pretty broad brush description of claim (i), about the generic definition of virtue; and then I’ll do a close reading of the text where Socrates advances (ii) and (iii), which concern the connection between virtuous order, law, and temperance.

This walk through of Phase C will cover section 1 on your handout, to which I now turn, where my purpose will be to establish that temperance is a virtue of obedience to law.

**1. Temperance as Obedience to Law: Text and Interpretation of Phase C**

Let us now walk through Phase C. Socrates begins by offering a generic account of virtue at 503c-506e. I call it generic because the account applies to the virtue of artefacts and animals as much as to the human soul; it’s about virtue in general. On this view, any thing that can be good – a good house or a good boat – becomes so when and because its virtue comes to be in it (506d3-4).[[2]](#footnote-2) A thing’s virtue consists in an ‘organization’ (τάξις) or ‘order’ (κόσμος) that is ‘proper’ to it (ὁ ἑκάστου οἰκεῖος, 506e1-3).[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, the virtue of a house is the ordering of materials that is proper (οἰκεῖος) to being a house, i.e., the sort which constitutes its materials into a suitable shelter. A thing’s proper order comes to be, Socrates tells us, by a kind of ‘correctness’ and ‘craft’ (ὀρθότης καὶ τέχνη) (506d7). So virtue, on this account, is the correct ordering of a thing’s materials, such as the craftsperson is uniquely positioned to arrange in the object on which he works.

Socrates draws up this generic account in order to apply it to a discussion of two kinds of human virtue: virtue of the body and virtue of the soul. This is occurs at [**T1**: 504c1-d3] on your handout. The purpose of **T1** is to tell us the ‘names’ under which know and think of the proper order of body and soul. Socrates tells us first that the name we give to the proper order of the body is ‘the healthy’, from which health and the rest of bodily virtue come to be. Then, in the text that I have italicized at the bottom of **T1,** Socrates makes a claim crucial to our purposes: he says that ‘law,’ νόμος, is the name we give to the soul’s order and virtue. I will read the italicized English of **T1**:

**[T1: 504c1-d3]**

**Soc.** And which [name] do we give to what comes into being in the soul as a result of organization and order? Try to find and tell me its name, as in the case of the body.

**Cal.** Why don’t you say it yourself…?

**Soc.** All right, if it pleases you... I think that the name for the body’s states of organization is ‘healthy,’ as a result of which health and the rest of bodily virtue comes into being in it. Isn’t this so?

Cal. It is.

**Soc*.*** *And [the name] for the organizations and orderings (τάξεσι καὶ κοσμήσεσιν) of the soul is ‘lawful’ and ‘law’ (νόμιμόν τε καὶ νόμος), from which people become law-abiding and orderly; and these are justice and*

*temperance (δικαιοσύνη τε καὶ σωφροσύνη).[[4]](#footnote-4)*

**[T1: 504c1-d3]**

**ΣΩ**. τί δὲ αὖ [*viz.*, ὄνομα] τῷ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἐγγιγνομένῳ ἐκ τῆς τάξεως καὶ τοῦ κόσμου; πειρῶ εὑρεῖν καὶ εἰπεῖν … τὸ ὄνομα.

**ΚΑΛ**. τί δὲ οὐκ αὐτὸς λέγεις…;

**ΣΩ**. ἀλλ᾽ εἴ σοι ἥδιόν ἐστιν, ἐγὼ ἐρῶ: … ἐμοὶ γὰρ δοκεῖ ταῖς μὲν τοῦ σώματος τάξεσιν ὄνομα εἶναι ὑγιεινόν, ἐξ οὗ ἐν αὐτῷ ἡ ὑγίεια γίγνεται καὶ ἡ ἄλλη ἀρετὴ τοῦ σώματος. ἔστιν ταῦτα ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν;

**ΚΑΛ.** ἔστιν.

**ΣΩ**. *ταῖς δέ γε τῆς ψυχῆς τάξεσι καὶ κοσμήσεσιν νόμιμόν τε καὶ νόμος, ὅθεν καὶ νόμιμοι γίγνονται καὶ κόσμιοι· ταῦτα δ᾽ ἔστιν δικαιοσύνη τε καὶ σωφροσύνη.*

Now, **T1** is a little bit tricky. It establishes a series of identities between three pairs of terms. The first pair is τᾶξις and κόσμος[[5]](#footnote-5), which I translate as organization and order; the second is νόμιμόν and νόμος, or lawful and law; and the third is δικαιοσύνη and σωφροσύνη, or justice and temperance. I could spend an entire talk asking how to make sense of these identities, and how to relate each of these six terms to the others. But I want to bypass that task as much as possible, and just rely on the following three conclusions.

First, the terms νόμιμόν and νόμος, as far as I can tell, pick out the same thing: two words for one thing. For both would appear to refer to what **T1** calls “that from which people become lawful,” *ὅθεν καὶ νόμιμοι γίγνονται*. Since these terms seem equivalent, I will restrict myself to speaking of νόμος or law.

Second, νόμος or law is the ‘name’ of the virtuous order of the soul. So, Socrates is asking us to think of virtue, or the soul’s virtuous order, as a law in the soul.

Third, Socrates tells us that justice and temperance ‘are’ the νόμος or law, in some sense or other of that phrase. So, an adequate account of these virtues in the *Gorgias* must make sense of their connection to law. In what follows, I will attempt to make sense of the connection of temperance and law; I will simply abandon discussion justice. However, if you have thoughts about justice in its connection to law, I’d be interested to hear them in the Q&A.

I want to develop the connection between temperance and law by appealing to another passage in the *Gorgias*: this is **T2** on your handout. **T2** occurs earlier in the conversation with Callicles, at the very beginning of what I called Phase A of the argument on temperance; **T2** is the passage where Socrates first introduces temperance as a subject for discussion. I will not read the passage out, but note that in the italicized section of it Socrates describes the temperate person as one who ‘rules himself,’ where this means ‘ruling the pleasures and desires within himself’ (τῶν ἡδονῶν καὶ ἐπιθυμιῶν ἄρχοντα τῶν ἐν ἑαυτῷ, 491d11-e1). Here is how I wish to make use this claim in **T2**, that to be temperate is to rule oneself and one’s desires: I interpret the notion of the temperate person as ‘self-ruler’ in light of **T1**’s account of temperance as a νόμος, or law. The temperate self-ruler, I suggest, rules herself *by imposing* the νόμος or law upon her soul’s desires, and ordering the desires to be consistent with the directives of the νόμος. For the temperate person to rule oneself, on this account, is to rule one’s desires under the νόμος of temperance.

From all of these remarks we can draw the following conclusion about temperance, whose key claims are listed on p. 2 of the handout. Temperance is itself a kind of ordering principle which is rightly called ‘law’; it is a law because the order is such as to render a person and his desires lawful. To be temperate, in turn, is to stand in a certain relation to this νόμος or law: it is to rule oneself and one’s desires under it.

I consider these reflections sufficient to establish the viability of the thesis which guides this paper, namely, that temperance is the virtue of obedience to law. The notion of obedience to law is captured by the description of the temperate person that I have offered, as one who rules himself under the law. For to rule oneself under a law, is to obey that law.

An obvious question for this account, however, remains: What is the nature and content of this law, which the temperate person obeys? I turn to this question on section 2 of your handout.

**2. The Law of Temperance as Divine Law**

In this section I advance two key claims, both listed on your handout: First, I suggest that the law of temperance is a divine law. Second, as I will also argue, the law of temperance has a political vocation: it directs the individual to act as a good citizen of the πόλις. In this way it anticipates a conception of law adumbrated in *Republic* 9 (590cd, for which see the appendix on the handout) and developed more deeply in Plato’s *Laws*, where Plato defends a picture of law associated with the rule of divine reason over the πόλις. The general thrust of my account is that the law which the temperate person obeys, is a divine ruling principle whose purpose is to direct the actions of the good citizen.

I develop this account of divine law out of a passage at 507e6-508a5 (**T3: 507e6-508a5** on the handout). **T3** occurs as a kind of coda to Socrates’ argument about temperance, at the end of what I have called Phase C on your handout Map. Prior to **T3**, Socrates has established that intemperance is a vice (504d-505c) and temperance a virtue (506c-507a), along with a quick argument that temperance implies the other cardinal virtues (507a-c). The conclusion that Socrates draws from these results is that “a person who wants to be happy must evidently pursue and practice temperance” (507c9-d1). This is the conclusion that Callicles has resisted for the last 16 or so Stephanus pages. Socrates’ next move is what interests us, quoted on **T3**. In **T3**, Socrates’ purpose is to explain to Callicles why Callicles has failed to accept the conclusions at which Socrates has been driving. Socrates appeals to the views of certain ‘wise men’, probably Pythagoreans,[[6]](#footnote-6) who teach of a providentially ordered cosmos in which temperance and a host of other virtues are elevated to the status of governing principles of the natural order. Callicles would not have resisted Socrates’ arguments, Socrates suggests, if he had heeded the teachings of these wise men. I’ll read the text of **T3**:

**[T3: 507e6-508a5]**

Yes, Callicles, wise men claim that community and friendship, orderliness, temperance, and justice hold together heaven and earth, and gods and humanity, and that is why they call this universe a world order, my friend, and not an intemperate [ἀκολασίαν][[7]](#footnote-7) world-disorder. I believe that you don’t pay attention to these facts…

**[T3: 507e6-508a5]**

φασὶ δ' οἱ σοφοί, ὦ Καλλίκλες, καὶ οὐρανὸν καὶ γῆν καὶ θεοὺς καὶ ἀνθρώπους τὴν κοινωνίαν συνέχειν καὶ φίλιαν καὶ κοσμιότητα καὶ σωφροσύνην καὶ δικαιότητα, καὶ τὸ ὅλον τοῦτο διὰ ταῦτα κόσμον καλοῦσιν, ὦ ἑταῖρε, οὐκ ἀκοσμίαν οὐδὲ ἀκολασίαν. σὺ δὲ μοι δοκεῖς οὐ προσέχειν τὸν νοῦν τούτοις…

Those familiar with the *Gorgias* will notice that **T3** reopens a theological thread of argument in the dialogue which first appeared in the famous Image of the Jars at 492e-494c, and appears again at the dialogue’s conclusion, where Socrates describes an eschatological myth of divine judgment of the soul after death (523a-527e). I call this thread ‘theological’ because it asks us to view the natural world in light of a Pythagorean vision of a divinely ordered cosmos, and teaches of the fate of the soul after death.[[8]](#footnote-8) **T3** of course does not touch on the soul’s fate after death, but rather the nature of the cosmic order which structures the natural world. It identifies “community and friendship, orderliness, temperance, and justice” (τὴν κοινωνίαν … καὶ φίλιαν καὶ κοσμιότητα καὶ σωφροσύνην καὶ δικαιότητα) as principles that “hold together heaven and earth” and thereby bind their parts into a single cosmic order.

What I wish to highlight is that these principles must govern human life just as they do the cosmic order as a whole; their governance extends from the cosmos to humans insofar as humans have a share in temperance, justice, orderliness, community, friendship. What **T3** tells us about these principles insofar as they influence human life, is that they are, in fact, *cosmic* principles, or principles which have their origin in a divine cosmic order, of which the human order is just a part. Temperance and justice, then, as they appears in humans, are the manifestation of divine governing principles.

Now, I want to use **T3** as a resource for interpreting the νόμος, or law of temperance, in **T1**. Here’s how I do it. In **T1** we learned that temperance is a κόσμος of the soul, whose name is ‘law’ or νόμος. Now from **T3** we learn that this κοσμιότης or ‘ordering’ of the soul has a divine origin; it flows from divine governing principles of the world-order. So, we may infer, the νόμος or law of temperance itself bears a divine origin: it is divine a governing principle of the soul. We can therefore think of the soul’s νόμος as a divine law.

This conclusion permits us to reinterpret our previous description of the temperate person as one who is obedient to law. The law which the temperate person obeys, we can now see, is a divine law.

**T3** also supplies crucial information about the aim and content of the law which the temperate person obeys. For, as **T3** tells us, friendship and community (φιλία and κοινωνία) are principles of the cosmic order or law which also govern the temperate person. The governance of these principles, we may infer, produces friendship and community in those whom they govern. Since the temperate person is under the governance of these principles, we thus learn something about the content of the law that shapes his motivations: it makes him fit for friendship and community, and prohibits action that violates the demands of friendship and community, such as harming others. The law determines the temperate person’s motivations so that he acts in a manner befitting the shared life of a community of φίλοι.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This result invites a question: What is the nature of this community of φίλοι, which the law of temperance produces in the souls that it orders? The answer, I think, must be the πόλις; and the friendship which binds its members together must be the bonds of civic friendship that bind citizens to one another in the co-operative character of political life. The evidence for this answer will emerge below, when we consider the connections between the law of temperance and another recurrent theme in the *Gorgias*, the so-called craft of politics or πολιτικὴ τέχνη. In the next final phase of my discussion, I shall rehears those connections. They are summarized on p. 3 of your handout, under the heading ‘Crash Course in the Craft of Politics.’[[10]](#footnote-10)

Socrates advances a conception of the πολιτικὴ τέχνη in the *Gorgias* which constitutes a two-fold discipline of legislation and justice (νομοθέτησις and δικαιοσύνη, 464b-465a). The former legislates positive laws, whereas the discipline of justice is punitive: it punishes the unlawful conduct of vicious souls, who fail to comply with relevant legislation. The aim which the practitioner of this τέχνη always has in view, in prescribing law and distributing punishment, is to produce what is best for the soul (464c4), which is to say, the condition of virtue: its practitioner “always gives his attention to how justice [and] temperance may come to be” in the soul (504d5-e4).We might therefore wonder: how does the two-fold discipline of legislation and punitive justice put virtue in the soul? Here is the answer. We have earlier seen that virtue *just is* a divine law in the soul. The τεχνικός politician must therefore know this law, and his purpose must be to implant the law in the souls of his fellow citizens: first he uses legislation to *promulgate* the law; and when he judges that his fellows do not comply with it, he uses punitive justice to punish them, and enforce compliance among the unwilling. In so doing he produces citizens whose motivating desires are ruled by **T1**’s law of virtue: their souls are thus ordered by the law of virtue. Thus the two-fold discipline of legislation and justice constitutes the means whereby the πολιτικὴ τέχνη makes citizens virtuous.

Now, I undertook this crash course on the πολιτικὴ τέχνη to establish my earlier suggestion that the community of φίλοι which the divine law of temperance produces in those whom it rules, is the πόλις. Here’s why we should draw this conclusion. The πολιτικὴ τέχνη, which aims to impose this law onto the soul and make people temperate, is an expertise concerned with how to rule the πόλις – it is the craft of politics, a ruling craft. Thus – and this is my point – the law promulgated by this τέχνη, which the temperate person obeys, produces citizens who act in a manner befitting communal life in the πόλις.

And with that – I know I am announcing this somewhat abruptly – I have now defended all of the key claims that I wish to advance in this paper, and I will summarize my argument. I first argued, from **T1** and **T2**, that temperance is the virtue of obedience to law, or what is the same, the virtue of ruling oneself under the law. I then developed an account of what the law is that the temperate person obeys. From **T3** we learned that it is a divine law. From our discussion of the craft of politics, we learned that its purpose is to direct the individual to act as a good citizen of the πόλις.

Why might these results matter? As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, scholars whom I have been able to read are silent on the connection between temperance and law, or virtue and law more generally in the *Gorgias*. They overlook most crucially **T1**, which identifies virtue with law. They also overlook the fact that the craft of politics, which produces virtue, includes legislation as one of its subdisciplines, which again associates virtue and law. Thus, if Socrates himself practices the craft of politics, as indeed he famously claims to do, alone among living Athenians, at the dialogue’s conclusion at 521de, then we must be able to integrate the notion of law into our account of the way he conceives of his own political practice. My suggestion has been to think of the law of virtue, which Socrates promotes, as a divine law, which governs the cosmos; Socrates’ practice, as practitioner of the craft of politics, is to promulgate this law to his fellow-citizens, so that they are ruled under the cosmic principles of justice, temperance, friendship, and community referenced in **T3** on your handout.

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1. See the bibliography for a sample of relevant discussions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 506d3-4: “We are good, and everything which is good is so, whenever a certain virtue comes to be in it” (Ἀλλὰ μὴν ἀγαθοί γέ ἐσμεν καὶ ἡμεῖς καὶ τἆλλα πάντα ὅσ' ἀγαθά ἐστιν, ἀρετῆς τινος παραγενομένης). Socrates makes use of the house and boat as examples at 503e-504a. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Palmer (2014) suggests that the account which follows, with its emphasis on κόσμος, draws on Pythagorean theories of virtue and good. I shall pick up on this suggestion in section 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Trans. Zeyl, with minor modifications. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In fact, Socrates uses κόσμος at the beginning of the passage as the counterpart of τᾶξις, but he uses κόσμησις at the end of the passage. I do not find any substantial difference in meaning between these two terms, or any reason to doubt that they refer to the a single ‘order’ or ‘ordering presence’ in the soul. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The opinion of Dodds (1959: 38) and Palmer (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This word picks out the opposite of temperance throughout Socrates’ conversation with Callicles. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The doctrine of the soul’s after-life is present both in the Image of the Jars and the myth of judgment. Dodds cites Aetius to shore up the Pythagorean connection in **T3** (*Dox. Gr.* 327 = *Vors.* 14 [4] 21): “Pythagoras first called the universe a κόσμος, because of the order in it” (Πυθγόρας πρῶτος ὠνόμασε τὴν τῶν ὅλων περιοχὴν κόσμον ἐκ τῆς ἐν αὐτῷ τάξεως). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Woolf (2000) also emphasizes the centrality of φιλία and community to Socrates’ conception of virtue and the human good. My account adds the connection to Pythagorean influence and the related account of divine law. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Apart from the evidence I consider below, an important *comparandum* for the connection between φιλία, κόσμος, and the πόλις may also be found in Protagoras’ Great Speech at *Protagoras* 322c: “[Zeus] sent Hermes to bring justice and a sense of shame to humans, so that there would be order (κόσμοι) within cities and bonds of friendship (δεσμοὶ φιλίας) to unite them.” Notice the close association that Protagoras draws between κόσμος and φιλία. The *Republic* also associates law and φιλία: at 590cd Socrates speaks of an impersonal νόμος which aims to impose the rule of a ‘divine ruler’ (τὸ θεῖον ἄρχον) on everyone in Kallipolis, thereby making them φίλοι to one another. Socrates here contrasts his vision of law and justice as distinct from Thrasymachus’, who regards law and political rule as instruments for rulers to subjugate their inferiors, rendering them not φίλοι but slaves. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)