Nietzsche, Callicles and the Will to Power

Bernardo Ferro
University of Warwick

Abstract

Many of Plato's dialogues are centred on the definition of the best kind of life. Wisdom, pleasure or political influence are put forth as possible versions of the greatest good, and the different lives they prescribe—i.e. philosophy, hedonism or rhetoric—are compared and discussed. A similar pursuit is attempted in many of Nietzsche's writings, where philosophy is tasked with determining the 'rank order of values' adopted throughout human life. Like Plato, Nietzsche conceives of human cognition as a global hierarchical system, whose inner structure must be brought to light. However, he rejects Plato's efforts to align this system with a moral or epistemological ideal. For Nietzsche, the entire system is driven by *power*, or rather the by 'will to power' that determines and motivates every human judgement. Starting from this general diagnosis, Nietzsche's aim is not only to expose every form of behaviour as a more or less direct instantiation of the 'will to power', but also to maximize the effects of this newly discovered drive—that is, to inaugurate a mode of existence that is no longer unconsciously, but *explicitly* focused on the pursuit and accumulation of power.

In this paper, drawing on a parallel first highlighted by Adolf Menzel, I briefly confront Nietzsche's project of a *philosophy of power* with the debate between Socrates and Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*, which also revolves around the notion of power (δυναστεία), its exact meaning and its theoretical, practical and political implications. In particular, I argue that Callicles' characterization of justice and equality as the symptoms of impotence and resentment anticipates Nietzsche's notion of *ressentiment*, which he famously associates with Platonism, Judaism, Christianity and modern democracy. Through this comparative analysis, I hope to shed light on a historical and philosophical connection that has yet to be properly recognized.

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In many of Plato's dialogues, Socrates and his interlocutors attempt to determine the best course of life. The debate usually takes the form of a dialectical contest between different values or worldviews: wisdom, pleasure or political influence are put forth as possible versions of the greatest good, and the different lives they prescribe—philosophy, hedonism or rhetoric—are likewise compared and discussed. In each case, the procedure amounts to the translation of a formal determination, τὸ μέγιστον ἀγαθόν, or τὸ βέλτιστον, into a concrete and consistent mode of valuation.

A similar pursuit is attempted in Nietzsche's writings, where 'future philosophers' are tasked with determining 'the *rank order of values*.'[1] Like Plato, Nietzsche conceives of human cognition as a global hierarchical system, whose inner structure must be brought to light; and also like Plato, he calls attention to human beings' ignorance of their own valuation system: usually, our choices and actions are put down to a more or less immediate practical concern, wrongly perceived as an end in itself; alternatively, in the realms of philosophy and religion, our thoughts and actions are led back to more general or abstract ideals. In all of these cases, however, the highest ranking value remains out of sight. For Nietzsche, this value is *power*; more specifically, the *augmentation* of the 'feeling of power' that determines and motivates every single judgement or decision. But Nietzsche's aim is not only to bring to light the real structure of human beings' system of valuation—that is, to expose every human intention as a more or less direct instantiation of the 'will to power'. He also means to align human aims and actions with this newly discovered drive—that is, to inaugurate a mode of existence that is no longer unconsciously, but *explicitly* focused on the pursuit and accumulation of power.

Yet the formal affinity between Plato's and Nietzsche's philosophical projects is even more profound. As already noted by a few scholars,[2] Nietzsche's proposed transition from a philosophy based on knowledge or morality to a *philosophy of power* is strongly evocative of the debate held throughout the *Gorgias*, which also revolves around the notion of power (δυναστεία), its exact meaning and its theoretical, practical and political implications.

I

Plato's *Gorgias* is centred on a question 'which has the highest conceivable claims to the serious interest even of a person who has but little intelligence—namely, what course of life is best.'[3] While Socrates maintains that the definition of the best kind of life is not immediate or self-evident, Callicles, Gorgias and Polus are all convinced that the best things in life are not that difficult to

[1] *Genealogy of Morality* [hereafter *GM*], 34 / *Kritische Studienausgabe* [hereafter *KSA*] 5, 289

[2] See also Dodds' commentary on the *Gorgias*, 386-391; Menzel, *Kallikles*; Kloch-Kornitz, 'Der Gorgias Platons und die Philosophie Friedrich Nietzsches'; Leyra, 'Calicles y Nietzsche'; Urstad, 'Nietzsche and Callicles on Happiness, Pleasure, and Power'.

[3] *Gorgias* 500c1-4

determine. To be sure, each person's idea of the best life is personal and likely to change with time and circumstances: while some people may choose to spend their whole life eating, others may regard hunting, gardening or praying as the most vital of occupations. But although the variety of life choices available to human beings is virtually endless, Socrates' opponents are convinced that there are more general definitions of the best life that everyone can agree on.

The first one is advanced by Gorgias, who links the attainment of the best possible life with the art of rhetoric. In his eyes, rhetoric is superior to all the other arts (τέχναι) because it is able to take hold of their insights and use them in its favour. Since 'there is no subject on which the rhetorician could not speak more persuasively than a member of any other profession'[4], rhetoric 'comprise[s] in itself practically all powers at once'[5]; and since the rhetors' eloquence enables them to steer the will of the crowd, they become powerful political agents, invited to give advice on important public matters and to help decide which laws are just and unjust. However, as Socrates points out, rhetors are nonetheless ignorant of the matters they persuade others about. They are not real τεχνῖται, but 'shrewd, gallant' spirits with 'a natural bent for clever dealing with mankind.'[6] Accordingly, they do not possess a method to distinguish justice from injustice, but only the ability to determine which decisions are likely to please the crowd. They prescribe what is pleasant (τὸ ἡδύ), but not necessarily what is best (τὸ βέλτιστον), and their decisions may end up harming the citizens and the state.

Pressed by Socrates, Gorgias concedes that good rhetors, if they are to be more than mere demagogues, must learn what is just and act accordingly. But Polus rejects this idea. For him, the fact that most rhetors are not concerned with justice, but merely with their own self-interest, does not restrict the power of rhetoric. On the contrary: if rhetors are not bound by moral or political scruples, their power is even greater, for they are free to talk anyone into saying or doing anything.

At this point, the dialogue enters its true subject matter. The debate between Polus and Socrates turns into a debate about power, its nature and the kind of freedom it affords. More specifically, it turns to the issue of whether power is *intrinsically* advantageous or must be *rendered so* through the acquisition of knowledge. Polus likens the rhetor's power to that of a despot: his deeds are not always just, but his authority compensates for his iniquities and protects him from harm; moreover, his limited regard for justice echoes an attitude that is instinctively shared by most of his subjects. Even though most citizens condemn crime and injustice, they do so out of respect for public order and fear of the law. But they would all be glad, if given the chance, to swap places with a powerful and unjust ruler.

Polus' position echoes some of the key points addressed by Socrates, Thrasymachus and Glaucon in the *Republic*'s first and second books. At stake in both dialogues is whether justice is desirable in itself or whether it is practised out of necessity, but against one's innermost will. Just as Polus maintains that no one in his or her right mind would choose a life of virtue over the life of a despot, Glaucon argues that for most people justice 'belongs to the toilsome class of things that must be practised for the sake of rewards and repute due to opinion, but that in itself is to be shunned as an affliction.'[7] If humans created laws that favour justice over injustice, it was not because the former is superior to the latter, but due to 'a compromise between the best, which is to do wrong

[4] *Gorgias* 456c4-6
[5] *Gorgias* 456a7-8
[6] *Gorgias* 463a7-8
[7] *Republic* 358a4-6

with impunity, and the worst, which is to be wronged and be impotent to get one's revenge.' [8] The respect for justice is thus artificially ensured by a 'social compact' devised by the weak and impotent to protect themselves against the strong.

For Thrasymachus and Glaucon, this idea is at the origin of the distinction between what is true or just *according to law*, or *custom* (κατὰ νόμον), and what is true or just *according to nature* (κατὰ φύσιν).[9] And this important sophistical theme[10] is further explored, in the *Gorgias*, by Callicles, who argues for the fundamental incompatibility between the social and the natural spheres: although a just life is socially commendable and practically necessary, lest one be marginalized or punished, it is by no means natural; for nature is by definition indifferent to human conventions, guided only by the immediate laws of life, growth and strength.

> By nature everything is fouler that is more evil, such as suffering wrong: doing it is fouler only by convention. … But, I fancy, when some man arises with a nature of sufficient force, he shakes off all that we have taught him, bursts his bonds, and breaks free; he tramples underfoot our codes and juggleries, our charms and 'laws', which are all against nature; our slave rises in revolt and shows himself our master, and there dawns the full light of natural justice.[11]

For Callicles, sovereignty and slavery are not merely social or political roles, but natural categories, which may or may not be actualized in the social and political realm. 'Natural' masters, on the one hand, are free to do what they please whenever they please, to indulge their every desire without fearing any requital. This, of course, is not allowed to the many, but only to the 'better type of mankind'[12], to whom 'luxury and licentiousness and liberty', since they 'have the support of force, are virtue and happiness.' [13] On the other hand, the lot of 'natural' slaves includes all of those who lack the strength to enjoy such freedom. But since these amount to the vast majority of human beings, the 'natural' opposition between masters and slaves is overturned and replaced by the 'social compact' mentioned above: most people, in order to disguise their own powerlessness, decry luxury and liberty as shameful and unjust. 'Being unable themselves to procure the achievement of their pleasures they praise temperance and justice by reason of their own unmanliness'[14], thus 'enslaving the better type of mankind'.[15]

Like Callicles, Socrates also speaks of mastery and slavery, but in very different terms. On his view, freedom is not primarily based on power or strength, but on knowledge. To refute Callicles' position, he starts by focusing on his distinction between a 'better' and a 'baser part of mankind': when asked what he means by superior and inferior sorts of people, Callicles offers a series of different, but equally problematic definitions. At 488d he claims that some human beings are superior to others due to their physical strength; at 489e he associates superiority with wisdom (or

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[8] *Republic* 359a5-7

[9] See *Gorgias* 482e-484c and *Republic* 359c. Though the debates in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic* are very similar, they also differ in significant ways. For a comparison, see Barney, 'Callicles and Thrasymachus'; Broze, 'Calliclès et Thrasymaque'.

[10] See Menzel, *Kallikles*, 1-75; Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 55-134.

[11] *Gorgias* 484a2-483b2

[12] *Gorgias* 492a6-7

[13] *Gorgias* 492c4-6

[14] *Gorgias* 492a7-b1

[15] *Gorgias* 492a6-7

soundness of mind, φρονιμότης); at 491b with courage and manhood; and at 491e with fullness and gratification (πλεονεξία).[16] In this last definition, the essence of Callicles' standpoint is finally brought out. His idea of freedom comes down to an extreme form of hedonism, where power is measured by the ability to 'let [one's] desires be as strong as possible, and not chasten them', and 'to minister to them when they are at their height', and 'to satisfy each appetite with what it desires.'[17]

While for Callicles this kind of power is intrinsically good, Socrates aims to show that it is really only a *version* of the greatest good; and what is more, a version that is ultimately inconsistent. As he proceeds to argue, the gratification craved by Callicles is not empowering or liberating, but enslaving, since it presupposes a continual state of dependence. And this contradiction leads back to the distinction between the good and the pleasant. What unites rhetors, despots and indeed anyone else, is not a natural appetite for power, strength, or gratification, but an incessant search for τὸ βέλτιστον, i.e. *the best there is*: every human being, whether rich or poor, powerful or miserable, eloquent or tongue-tied, wants to lead the best possible life. But although all of us choose and act in view of what is best, most of us lack a solid criterion whereby to determine what it actually is. The reason for this, Socrates argues, lies in the difference between the things we *wish* and the things we *know*. Since we all wish what is best, we all do what we *think* is best; but since what we think is best is not necessarily so, we do not always do what we wish.

In other words, true freedom rests on the ability to distinguish good or beneficial pleasures from bad or harmful ones. And such ability presupposes a specific knowledge, provided by a specific τέχνη. For Socrates, the name of this τέχνη is none other than philosophy, 'a certain practice or preparation' for the acquisition of the good.[18] Following this new definition, the initial dispute between Socrates and Gorgias concerning the merits of rhetoric is recast under a new light: whereas the rhetor's art consists in the procurement of pleasure or gratification, naïvely understood as naturally or immediately beneficial, the philosopher's role is to expose the ambivalent nature of pleasure and to distinguish good pleasures from false or illusory ones; moreover, whereas Gorgias had defined rhetoric as the finest of all arts, comprising all powers at once, this epithet is now ascribed to philosophy. By attempting to define what is best, the philosopher's aim is to lay out the very ground on which freedom of any kind can flourish.

II

In his pioneering study on Callicles' historical legacy, Adolf Menzel was the first to highlight the close affinity between the debate held throughout the *Gorgias* and some of the main themes later explored by Nietzsche.[19] On the one hand, Callicles' claim that justice and temperance are born out of impotence and resentment anticipates Nietzsche's well-known insistence on the 'morality of *ressentiment*', which he associates with Platonism, Christianity and democracy. In both cases, the natural dimension of freedom and sovereignty are overridden by their social and political

[16] The word πλεονεξία only comes up later, at 508a7, but Plato uses it to sum up this passage and its subsequent developments.

[17] *Gorgias* 491e8-492a2

[18] *Gorgias* 500d8-9

[19] See Menzel, *Kallikles*, 80f. This closeness is both striking and enigmatic inasmuch as Nietzsche, who knew Plato's work very well, does not refer once to Callicles, and only twice, in passing, to Plato's *Gorgias* (*KSA* 1, 790 and *KSA* 9, 174).

dimensions, which results in an artificially imposed respect for justice, compassion and equality. On the other hand, Callicles' difficulty in defining the exact nature of the power wielded by superior beings also anticipates Nietzsche's unwillingness to reduce the will to power to a specific end or ideal. For Callicles, as for Nietzsche, power is not merely about strength, wisdom or courage, as though powerful individuals would simply have to submit to these values and pursue them in the best or most effective way possible. Πλεονεξία seems to refer, rather, to power or volition in a more basic or primordial sense: not a movement oriented towards a specific end, but a movement which is itself its own end; not a matter of achieving this or that particular goal, but the ability to renew and intensify a physiological drive for self-enjoyment and self-enhancement.

But although Nietzsche, like Callicles, associates power with pleasure and enjoyment, he is careful to distinguish the 'will to power' from any conventional form of hedonism. In his own words, 'hedonism, pessimism, utilitarianism, eudaemonism', insofar as they are all 'ways of thinking that measure the value of things according to pleasure and pain', are focused on 'secondary states and matters. They are all foreground ways of thinking and naïvetés, and nobody who is conscious of both *formative* powers [*gestaltende Kräfte*] and an artist's conscience will fail to regard them with scorn as well as pity.'[20] The will to power is thus something other than the 'will to pleasure', or the 'will to self-advantage', or the 'will to self-preservation'. These are all symptoms or consequences, but not yet the essence of the phenomenon Nietzsche places at the core of human life.

What, then, does one will when one *wills power*? A definitive answer to this question is not easy to find in Nietzsche's writings, not because he forgot to tackle such an important issue, but because his main aim is precisely to overcome the philosophical prejudice underlying this kind of formulation. As he repeatedly argues, to ask about the specific *end* of the will to power is to look for a '*superfluous* teleological principle'[21]. Whereas philosophical, scientific or moral modes of valuation are grounded in a finalist approach to human life—whether focused on truth, logical coherence, self-preservation or selflessness—a 'philosophy of the future' must look beyond this cognitive scheme. Power, unlike the 'true' or the 'good', is not something fixed to be craved or pursued, but 'something *to be created*, which designates a *process*, or what is more a will to overpower [*Überwältigung*] that has in itself no end.' It is 'a *processus in infinitum*, an *active determining*, not a becoming-conscious of something [that is] fixed and determined "in itself."'[22]

As these passages make clear, Nietzsche's *Machtphilosophie* is both a descriptive and a normative undertaking: unlike ordinary men and women, Nietzsche's 'future philosophers' must be able to create their own values, and to do so they must liberate themselves from the normative framework of truth and morality. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates' final debate with Callicles is centred precisely on the possibility of this liberation. Whilst Nietzsche aims to move beyond the oppositions truth/untruth and good/evil, Socrates argues for the pervasive or *transcendental* value of these two oppositions. As in many other dialogues, Plato's views amount to the restatement of a global diagnosis of human cognition based on two major observations: namely a) that every human belief is necessarily grounded in a specific account of reality, automatically assumed to be true, i.e. to reveal reality as it actually is; and b) that this account is never neutral or disinterested,

[20] *BGE,* 116 / *KSA* 5, 160. Translation modified. Cf. *KSA* 13, 30 and 33ff.
[21] *BGE*, 15 / *KSA* 5, 27f.
[22] *KSA* 12, 385

but globally oriented towards the pursuit of what is perceived to be, consciously or otherwise, the greatest good or the best course of life available. In short, truth and goodness, as well as untruth and evil, are the formal standards underlying the adoption of every human belief, choice or course of action. They can be filled with different contents, or given different names—but never truly eliminated.

If the good is indeed 'the end of all our actions; if 'it is for its sake that all other things [are] done'[23], then every kind of life—be it the life praised by Callicles (and Nietzsche) or the one praised by Socrates—represents a *version* of the best possible life, adopted and pursued for this very reason. As all versions, however, it may be *true*, and actually beneficial, or *illusory*, and potentially harmful. It is upon this disjunction that Plato grounds his entire attack on Callicles (and Nietzsche): if every life is doomed to be a version of a true and good life, the determination of its value is ultimately dependent on whether one can actually demonstrate, rather than merely assert, that it is in fact so. In other words, an accurate mode of valuation, capable of ensuring the attainment of power, strength, wisdom or any other quality deemed beneficial or self-enhancing, is necessarily dependent on an epistemic outlook on reality—which can only be attained, if at all, through the practice of philosophy.

For Nietzsche, on the contrary, everything hinges on the possibility of refuting this line of argument and showing that our attachment to the good and the true is not as natural or as essential. But the assessment of whether and to what extent this move is possible depends on how radically we choose to interpret Nietzsche's position. If, on the one hand, his call for a 'transvaluation of all values' is taken to mean that human beings' standard of valuation will no longer epistemic or moral, but physiological, this may simply amount to claiming that what is usually deemed good and true will cease to be so: truthfulness and goodness will henceforth be determined by one's virility, strength, health, etc., and hence applied to things which were previously deemed evil or untrue. The main tenets of truth and morality will no longer be dictated by slavish or pious beings, but by strong and virile ones. Yet although this version of the argument does accord with some of Nietzsche's formulations, it is still fairly superficial, as it affects only the *content*, and not yet the *form* of valuation. The oppositions truth/untruth and good/evil have not been overcome, but merely translated in different ways.

This kind of reading underlies most historical and political appropriations of Nietzsche. Indeed, many of the misunderstandings surrounding the Nietzschean notions of 'over-humanity', 'power' or 'nobility' stem from a superficial interpretation of his philosophical project, subordinated to very concrete political ends. In these cases, the 'transvaluation of all values' has been rather shy: the overcoming of truth and morality was motivated by very specific, albeit controversial versions of the good and the true; 'new values', just like old ones, were oriented towards a specific identification of the greatest good, or the best possible life.

A second, more radical interpretation of Nietzsche's project consists in the attempt to overcome the attachment to the true and the good *altogether*. Only this version is faithful to Nietzsche's explicit intention of moving beyond teleology and purposiveness *as such*, and to free humankind from the slavishness of the 'will to truth' and the 'will to the good'. But here the stakes are of course much higher: if every human judgement or decision entails, if only unconsciously or momentarily, the validation of a specific version of things (viz. a specific account of who one is,

[23] *Gorgias* 499e7-500a2

of where one stands, of what the world looks like, of what is at stake in a given situation, and so on), a life no longer supported by such validation—or, which amounts to the same thing, a life where such version were lived as a mere version, *and nothing more*—would be stripped of its most basic practical references and faced with the possibility of a complete existential paralysis.

In its most extreme form, then, the will to power entails a complete divorce between the cognitive and the volitional dimensions of human life. And this possibility raises a very difficult question, regarding the criterion employed by this new form of consciousness. If the notions of truth and the good cease to guide human life, which notions, if any, can take their place? Assuming that human cognition requires some kind of normativity, what will the latter be based on? These and similar challenges point to a new and uncharted territory. They seem to require an insight into a kind of experience that our usual standpoint is simply not equipped to conceive. Accordingly, Nietzsche often places the endpoint of his proposed transformation beyond the limits of humanity: perhaps the overcoming of our usual mode of valuation is indeed an 'overhuman' task, whose result cannot be appreciated from this side of existence.

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