

Plato on Tyranny in the Gorgias

Introduction

The good governance of a state is, for Plato, analogous to the good governance of oneself – and the principles that he applies to one, he also applies to the other. Thus both the *Republic* and the *Gorgias* can be read from at least these two angles. Towards the end of the *Republic* in which the various characters spend a long time (300 pages!) discussing these principles and their application to the good life, Socrates says,

". . . this of all things is most to be studied, in what manner every one of us, omitting other disciplines, shall become an inquirer and learner in this study, if, by any means, he be able to learn and find out who will make him expert and intelligent to discern a good life, and a bad; and to choose everywhere, and at all times, the best of what is possible . . . and, having an eye to the nature of the soul, to comprehend both the worse and the better life, pronouncing that to be the worse which shall lead the soul to become more unjust, and that to be the better life which shall lead it to become more just, and to dismiss every other consideration." (618c-e)

The tyrant (that is to say someone who has obtained power by force rather than by legal means, and who continues to exercise arbitrary authority in the same manner) is the subject of parts of both dialogues. Here is Socrates arguing with Polus, an Athenian rhetorician, who has said that someone who is a good rhetorician has the ability to wield tyrannical power.

Gorgias 466b-469b

Pol. Do, therefore, good rhetoricians appear to you to be considered in the same place as vile flatterers in cities?

Soc. Do you propose this as a question, or as the beginning of a certain discourse?

Pol. As a question.

Soc. They do not then appear to me to be considered in the same place as vile flatterers in cities.

Pol. How not *to be considered*? Are they not able to accomplish the greatest things in cities?

Soc. They are not, if you allow that to be endued with power is good to him who is endued with it.

Pol. But this indeed I do say.

Soc. Rhetoricians, therefore, appear to me to possess the least power of all men in cities.

Pol. But what, do they not like tyrants slay, take away possessions, and banish from cities whomever they please?

Soc. By the dog, Polus, I am doubtful with respect to each of the things said by you, whether you assert these things yourself, and exhibit your own opinion, or interrogate me.

Pol. But I interrogate you.

Soc. Be it so, my friend. But do you not ask me two things at once?

Pol. How two things?

Soc. Did you not just now say, that rhetoricians like tyrants slew whomever they pleased, deprived them of their possessions, and expelled them from cities?

Pol. I did.

Soc. I therefore say to you that these are two questions, and I shall give you an answer to both. For I say, Polus, that rhetoricians and tyrants possess the least power of all men, in cities, as I just now said. For, in short, they accomplish nothing which they wish to accomplish; and yet they do that which appears to them to be best.

Pol. Is not this, therefore, to possess the power of accomplishing great things?

Soc. It is not, as says Polus.

Pol. Do I say not? On the contrary, I say it is.

Soc. By Zeus, not you. For you said that to be able to do great things is good to him who possesses this power.

Pol. And I now say so.

Soc. Do you think, therefore, it is a good thing, if any one void of intellect does that which appears to him to be best? And do you call this the ability of accomplishing something great?

Pol. Not I.

Soc. Will you not, therefore, evince that rhetoricians are endued with intellect, and, confuting me, show that rhetoric is an art, and not flattery? For, if you do not confute me, rhetoricians and tyrants, who do in cities whatever they please, will not by so doing obtain any thing good. But power is, as you say, good; though, for a man to do without intellect whatever he pleases, you also have acknowledged to be evil. Or have you not?

Pol. I have.

Soc. How then can rhetoricians or tyrants be able to accomplish any thing great in cities, unless Polus evinces, against Socrates, that they do whatever they please?

Pol. Is it possible any one can speak so absurdly?

Soc. I do not say that they accomplish what they wish: but confute me if you can.

Pol. Did you not just now acknowledge, that they accomplished things which appeared to them to be best?

Soc. And I now acknowledge this.

Pol. Do they not, therefore, do that which they wish to do?

Soc. I say they do not.

Pol. But do they do that which they think fit?

Soc. I say they do.

Pol. You speak shockingly and monstrously.

Soc. Do not accuse me, most excellent Polus, that I may speak to you in your own way; but, if you are capable of interrogating me any further, evince in what it is I am deceived; but if not, do you yourself answer.

Pol. But I am willing to answer, that I may also know what you say.

Soc. Whether, therefore, do men appear to you to wish this, which every individual accomplishes, or that for the sake of which they accomplish this which they accomplish? As for instance, whether do those who take medicines from a physician appear to you to wish this which they do, *viz.* to drink the medicine, and suffer pain; or do they wish to be well, for the sake of which they take the medicine?

Pol. They doubtless wish to be well, for the sake of which they drink the medicine.

Soc. Does not the like happen to navigators, and to those who are engaged in other employments, *viz.* that the object of their wishes is not that which each of them does (for who would wish to sail, to encounter dangers, and to be entangled with a multiplicity of affairs?); but, in my opinion, the object of their wishes is that for the sake of which they venture on the sea, *viz.* to acquire riches. For they sail for the sake of wealth.

Pol. Entirely so.

Soc. In like manner, with respect to all other things, he who does anything for the sake of some particular thing does not wish this which he does, but that for the sake of which he does it.

Pol. It is so.

Soc. Is there any thing, therefore, in the whole of existence, which is neither good nor evil? Or is there a medium between these, which is neither good nor evil?

Pol. It is abundantly necessary, Socrates, that there should.

Soc. Do you not, therefore, say that wisdom and health, riches, and other things of this kind, are good, but the contraries of these evil?

Pol. I do.

Soc. But do you say that things which are neither good nor evil are of such a kind, that they sometimes partake of good, sometimes evil, and sometimes of neither; such as to sit, to run, to walk, and to sail; and again, such things as stones, wood, and other things of this kind? Are

not these the things which you speak of? Or do you call other certain things neither good nor evil?

Pol. I do not: but these are the things.

Soc. Whether, therefore, do men, when they act, accomplish these things which subsist as means, for the sake of things good, or things good for the sake of these means?

Pol. Doubtless, the means for the sake of things good.

Soc. Pursuing good, therefore, we both walk when we walk, thinking it is better so to do; and, on the contrary, we stand when we stand, for the sake of the same good. Or is it not so?

Pol. It is.

Soc. Do we not, therefore, when we slay, or banish, or deprive any one of his possessions, think that it is better for us to do these things than not to do them?

Pol. Entirely so.

Soc. Those, therefore, that do all these things do them for the sake of good.

Pol. I say so.

Soc. Do we not, therefore, grant that we do not wish those things which we do for the sake of something, but that for the sake of which we do these things?

Pol. We especially admit this.

Soc. We do not, therefore, simply wish to slay, exterminate, or deprive any one of his possessions; but if these things are useful we wish to do them, but by no means if they are noxious. For we desire good things, as you say, but not such as are neither good nor evil, nor yet such as are evil. Do I, therefore, Polus, appear to you to speak the truth, or not? Why do you not answer?

Pol. You speak the truth.

Soc. Does it not follow, therefore, if we assent to these things, that if any one slays, exterminates from a city, or takes away the possessions of another, whether he is a tyrant or a rhetorician, thinking that it is better for him so to do, though it is worse, - does it not follow, that in so doing he acts in a manner which to him seems fit?

Pol. Yes.

Soc. Does he, therefore, do the things which he wishes to do, if these things are evil? Why do you not answer?

Pol. But he does not appear to me to do the things which he wishes.

Soc. Will, therefore, a man of this kind be able to accomplish great things in a city, if to be able to accomplish great things is something good, according to your concession?

Pol. He will not.

Soc. I therefore said true, when I said that a man might do that in a city which seemed fit to him, and yet not be able to accomplish great things, nor do that which he wished to do.

Pol. As if, Socrates, you would not admit, that it is possible for you to do what you please in a city, rather than that it is not possible, and that you would not be envious when you saw any one slaying or taking away the possessions of another, or confining in bonds whomever he pleased.

Soc. Do you speak justly or unjustly?

Pol. Whichever of these he may do, is he not in each of these actions to be envied?

Soc. Good words, I beseech you, Polus.

Pol. But why?

Soc. Because it is not proper, either to envy those that are not to be envied, or the unhappy; but they ought to be pitied.

Pol. But what? Does this appear to you to be the case respecting the men of whom I speak?

Soc. Undoubtedly.

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470e Polus: Then doubtless you will say, Socrates, that you do not know that even the Great King [of Persia] is happy.

Socrates: Yes, and I shall be speaking the truth; for I do not know how he stands in point of education and justice.

Polus: Why, does happiness entirely consist in that?

Socrates: Yes, by my account, Polus; for a good and honorable man or woman, I say, is happy, and an unjust and wicked one is wretched.

471a Polus: Then this Archelaus, on your statement, is wretched?

Socrates: Yes, my friend, supposing he is unjust.

Polus: Well, but how can he be other than unjust? He had no claim to the throne which he now occupies, being the son of a woman who was a slave of Perdiccas' brother Alcetas, and in mere justice he was Alcetas' slave; and if he wished to do what is just, he would be serving Alcetas and would be happy, by your account; but, as it is, he has become a prodigy of wretchedness, since he has done the most enormous wrong.

471b First of all he invited this very master and uncle of his to his court, as if he were going to restore to him the kingdom of which Perdiccas had deprived him; and after entertaining him and his son Alexander--his own cousin, about the same age as himself--and making them drunk, he

471c packed them into a carriage, drove them away by night, and murdered
and made away with them both. And after all these iniquities he failed
to observe that he had become a most wretched person and had no
repentance, but a while later he refused to make himself happy by
bringing up, as he was justly bound, his brother, the legitimate son of
Perdiccas, a boy about seven years old who had a just title to the throne,
and restoring the kingdom to him; but he cast him into a well and
drowned him, and then told his mother Cleopatra that he had fallen in
471d and lost his life while chasing a goose. So now, you see, as the greatest
wrongdoer in Macedonia, he is the most wretched of all the
Macedonians, not the happiest; and I daresay *some* Athenians could be
found who would join you in preferring to change places with any other
Macedonian of them all, rather than with Archelaus!

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