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The Rhetoric of Tyranny: Callicles the Rhetor and Nietzsche's Zarathustra

Greg Whitlock

1. Preview

Here I will work through the rhetoric of tyranny as practiced by Callicles and as reflected in Nietzsche's Zarathustra, in particular. In Part 2 it will be shown that Nietzsche's account of Plato as the complex figure with a Socratic exterior but a latent alternative ego of the tyrant, arrived at an image consistent with E.R. Dodds' later thesis. Callicles the rhetor, featured as a student of Gorgias, embodies this alter-ego. In Part 3 we find Callicles and Zarathustra shared very similar beliefs once they overcame shame and gained honesty. Indeed, Callicles expounded a number of propositions foundational to the theory of will to power. The weaklings equate power with evil. But Callicles and others who have overcome their shame restore the real truths about power relations. The unashamed teach the will to power, and nothing else. Callicles took power to mean brute tyranny, however neutrally he described it. And he seemed to believe that every man had the desire to be tyrant operative in him. Even more, that life itself is one great struggle for power. As Part 4 shows, Callicles distinguished between moralities of the weak and moralities of the strong in a theory reminiscent of Nietzsche's genealogy of morals. Callicles endorsed an aristocratic master morality, though one of a hedonistic sort. Callicles made clear that the inferiors remain content to be granted equal *status* (not real equality). So it is a social convention, not an adjustment of power relations in nature that makes an inferior an 'equal.' As long as the convention is observed, there exists a compromise solution. But when the rhetoric of shame has been dismissed, and the inequality of men frankly asserted publicly, the compensation gets lost, and the natural relations of power are restored. This occurrence shocks and disorients, as well as maddens, the inferior people. A sudden loss of shame and the voicing of unspoken truths activates other superiors by justifying their will to power anew, and by flattering those already in love with power by implying possibilities of absolute rule. This raises the specter of a master revolt in morals, meaning a revolution by aristocratic types against democratic government, and one

likely resulting in a tyranny. In Part 5 Callicles develops an implicit argument for tyranny. His first premise: What is right by nature may be wrong by convention, and vice-versa. The second premise: Right is might. A third premise states: The art of contriving to suffer no wrong, or as little as possible, is to become the ruling power or even a tyrant in your city. A fourth is required: It is worse to be wronged than to wrong someone else. And so his conclusion follows: Right is to become the ruling power, or even the tyrant, of one's city. In Part 6 we determine that Callicles and Nietzsche represent cultural throw-backs to an earlier, less civilized way of thinking among the early Greeks. It seems this includes a tyrannical mode of thinking. Zarathustra learned to affirm the inevitability of the weak, and even the eventual triumph of the smaller type. But perhaps he needed to accept such a thing only as the realization that the foes cannot be completely eliminated. In Part 7 we turn to the crucial question of a master revolt in morals. Callicles held that stronger types could rule again, in a sort of master revolt in morals reversing the slave revolt in morals, while Nietzsche believed that the weak would eventually win regardless of any temporary set-backs from stronger elements. Did Zarathustra, though, give up all thoughts of a tyranny for the strong? Put another way, is Zarathustra the freest spirit of all free spirits and anti-tyrant par excellence, or is Zarathustran freedom the freedom to become a tyrant? Using passages from *Twilight*, I interpret him as a tyrant. In the final Part 8 I identify the mysterious "youth on the mountainside" from *Zarathustra*: The youth is Callicles, or his avatar, imprisoned in liberal democratic institutions, still unable to express his full illiberal power.

2. Callicles the Rhetor

Who was Callicles? "Of Callicles we know absolutely nothing beyond what Plato tells us in the *Gorgias*." (Dodds 12) E.R. Dodds viewed Callicles as likely an historical person, possibly connected to Plato by marriage, who died young, perhaps due to his vocal pretensions to become tyrant over Athens. Dodds argued that Callicles was a rhetor and not a Sophist. He was certainly not a philosopher, nor did he care to become one, though he was friendly toward Socrates. Callicles made clear, as Plato described him, that his primary concerns in life were public speeches in the agora and proceedings in law courts. Far from a typical democrat, Callicles overtly wished to rule as an autocrat over the people he despised. Callicles considered himself a realist. Crucially, Dodds believed, "Plato had known such men [as Callicles] in his early youth, and had probably

felt a measure of sympathy for them. He admired their candour, and he shared their contempt for the masses, for the professors of ἀρετή, and for all the hypocrisies of a society whose morality was built on appearances ... Hence his portrait of Callicles not only has warmth and vitality but is tinged with a kind of regretful affection.” (Dodds 13-14)

Based on this insight, Dodds formulated a thesis of particular importance. “One is tempted to believe that Callicles stands for something which Plato had it in him to become (and would perhaps have become, but for Socrates), an unrealized Plato who ... lies buried deeply beneath the foundations of the *Republic*.” (Dodds 14) This surprising image of Plato with a tyrannical alter-ego seems especially important because Nietzsche had arrived at roughly the same image from very different premises.

Consider the grand picture Nietzsche painted of Plato in relation to Socrates. Plato was a “royal and magnificent hermit of the spirit.” (BGE 204) Yet his inspiration, Socrates, was a degenerate slave moralist. “Socrates belonged by extraction to the lowest of the people: Socrates was rabble.” (*Twilight* “Socrates” 3) He was ugly, criminal and decadent. He was driven by a chaos of instincts. “I am seeking to understand,” wrote Nietzsche, “what was the idiosyncrasy which gave rise to that Socratic equation, reason = virtue = happiness: that most bizarre of all equations, which, in particular, has all the instincts of the older Hellene ranged against it.” (*Twilight* “Socrates” 4) Though Plato had the potential to be an aristocratic radical, he gave up his own nature to follow Socrates’ slave morality. “With Socrates, Greek taste switches over in favour of dialectics: what is actually going on here? Above all it means a *noble* taste is defeated: with dialectics the rabble comes out on top.” (*Twilight* “Socrates” 5) Dialectics were regarded poorly before Socrates. Demanding and giving reasons for one’s behavior, for the Hellene, constituted a type of buffoonery. Socrates had turned to dialectic, then, as a last resort for survival. It is an “emergency defense in the hands of those who have no other weapons left.” Dialectics was a weapon of revenge in the hands of Socrates. “The moralism of Greek philosophers from Plato onwards is pathologically conditioned: likewise their appreciation of dialectics. Reason = virtue = happiness means simply: we must imitate Socrates and establish permanent *daylight* to combat the dark desires...” (*Twilight* “Socrates” 10)

So Plato was the prime proponent of the Socratic campaign for dialectic. He supported the Socratic morality of improvement, embraced the anti-sensualist ideas of Socrates and became a decadent, too. Plato sided with Socrates over the Hellenic tradition, steeped in a culture of instincts. As a youth in the aristocracy, Plato

internalized Socratism as something alien and outside his surroundings. Socratism came as an act of revenge against Hellenism in favor of a Semitic dialectic. The Jews had turned to dialectic as a means of last resort, and it came to Plato in the same fashion. In the case of Socrates, though, he was in a desperate struggle against his own plebeian desires. He was an erotic figure who wrestled with chaos in his psyche. Plato was a similar erotic, a “strange fellow” excited by the (male) youth of Athens. “What was it that ultimately grew out of this philosophical erotics of Plato’s? A new art-form of the Greek agon, dialectics.” (*Twilight* “Raids” 23)

Anti-Hellenic and Semitic by instinct (WP 427), Plato disenfranchised the Greek gods with his Form of the Good, which was already mired in Judaism. (Schlechta III 564 mine) He was profoundly and passionately anti-Hellenic. (WP 435) He inherited Aryan morality and law-giving: In a letter to Peter Gast, Nietzsche wrote, “...Plato seems to me in all the main points simply to have been well instructed by a Brahmin.” (Middleton 298) Christianity is Platonism for the people. (BGE Preface) And so Plato was a slave moralist like Moses and Christ.

At another level, Nietzsche suggested that Socrates, as a plebeian, used dialectic against the ruling classes of Athens in an act of civic revenge. But what of the aristocratic Plato? He abandoned the master morality of instincts prevalent among Athenian nobility in favor of the plebeian slave morality of Socrates.

Socrates himself, to be sure, ... had initially sided with reason ... what did he do with his life but laugh at the awkward incapacity of noble Athenians who, like all noble men, were men of instinct and never could give sufficient information about the reasons for their actions? ... But is that any reason, he encouraged himself, for giving up his instincts? One has to see to it that they as well as reason receive their due—one must follow the instincts but persuade reason to assist them with good reasons. ... [A]t bottom, he had seen through the irrational element in moral judgments. (BGE 191)

And so Plato was “too noble” for Socratism. The influence of Socrates was something in his morality “in spite of Plato,” (BGE 190) who possessed potential as an aristocratic radical, like Callicles. “Since Plato, all theologians and philosophers are on the same track—that is, in moral matters it has so far been instinct...that has triumphed.” (BGE 191) Plato lacked “the craftiness of the plebeian,” yet he agreed with the “herd” in

praise of instinct. And so out of innocence, he agreed with Socrates that *all men seek to do the good.*—

In an exceptionally important note, Nietzsche wrote that his “struggle against Socrates, Plato and all the Socratic schools proceeds from the profound instinct that one does not make men better when one represents to them that virtue is demonstrable and asks for reasons.” (WP 441) Plato was an ‘improver of mankind, but in Nietzsche’s estimation,

The entire morality of improvement ... was a misunderstanding ... and definitely not a way back to ‘virtue,’ ‘health,’ ‘happiness’... To have to fight against the instincts — this is the formula for decadence: so long as life is ascendant, happiness equals instinct. (Twilight “Socrates” 11)

Plato proposed to improve mankind by idealism and Forms, but Nietzsche rejected nearly the entire project. Man should be “improved,” instead, by enhancement of his sensibilities and animal nature. Plato’s domesticated animal is a sick animal, and Nietzsche sought to improve the animal by enhancing its capacities. Zarathustra said, “Virtue to them is that which makes modest and tame: with that they have turned the wolf into a dog and man himself into man’s best domestic animal.” (*Zarathustra* “On Virtue that Makes Small” 2) Plato’s character Callicles argued a position intriguingly similar to Nietzsche’s. Is it not possible that Nietzsche modeled his revaluation of Plato from the perspective of the character Callicles? Indeed, before Nietzsche was the Anti-Christ, or even before he was the Anti-Wagner and Anti-Schopenhauer, he was the Anti-Plato. And Callicles, as both Dodds and Nietzsche conceived of such a person, was an anti-Plato as alter-ego of Plato himself. Indeed, *Callicles was the Anti-Plato before Nietzsche; not a complete invention by Plato, but Plato’s own inner voice of aristocratic radicalism*—a sort of “secret and sphinx-like nature,” as Nietzsche put it. Dodds wrote,

...certain of the most notorious of [Nietzsche’s] own doctrines were in some measure inspired by Plato—not, however, by the philosopher who speaks to us through the mouth of Socrates, but by the anti-Plato in Plato whose personae is Callicles. (Dodds 387)

I would, then, agree with Professor Dodds that “Nietzsche thus came to see in the ‘Sophists’ forerunners of his own radical moral skepticism.” (Dodds 389) Yet nowhere in the published works (or notes other than one lecture note) did Nietzsche mention Callicles by name. In my opinion, Dodds seems correct to point to a note from March-June 1888 as alluding to Callicles. “The Sophists are no more than realists ... They possess the courage of all strong spirits to *know* their own immorality.”(WP 429) If this note still appears too broad to suggest Callicles, I would mention that in Nietzsche’s lectures on Plato, he nominated Callicles as the spokesman of the Sophists. This note, importantly, came from the notes prepared for *Twilight*, and many more of the notes in *Will to Power* grouped as “Critique of Greek Philosophy” seem based on the discussion of honesty and shame found in the *Gorgias*.

3. Shame

The *Gorgias* dialogue presents the reader with a profound psychology and rhetoric of shame. In the early section of the dialogue, Socrates questioned Gorgias, a teacher of rhetoric, about the value and purpose of rhetoric. Rather than tell Socrates that rhetoric can be used for good or evil, and has no higher value than as an art, Gorgias dishonestly defended rhetoric as moral in its aims and means. He was, though, quickly brought into contradiction by Socrates. One of Gorgias’ students, Polus, took up defense of rhetoric although he also was not fully honest about his real beliefs. Gorgias and Polus were ashamed to admit their desire to become tyrants by using rhetoric to gain power over the city. Shame is not saying what one really believes (*Gorgias* 483a). In the third and most important section of the dialogue, Callicles the rhetor rejected shamefulness and honestly spoke his mind. Socrates seemed to admire the honesty of Callicles, as Plato portrayed the action, and this is part of the ‘warmth’ in the narrative. Not coincidentally, another philosophical drama used the context of shame: Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. “‘To speak the truth and to handle bow and arrow well’—that seemed both dear and difficult to the people who gave me my name...,” said the main character. (*Zarathustra* “On the Thousand and One Goals”) Zarathustra’s honesty is his great virtue, and for him, as for Callicles, honesty is saying what one means. Zarathustra says what he means in his speeches, hence his radical aristocratic style. What they share is a disdain for the masses; Callicles and Zarathustra, like Plato and Nietzsche, were profoundly anti-democratic, and they expressed it *honestly*.

This would already be an interesting comparison, but far more striking is that Callicles and Zarathustra shared very similar beliefs once they overcome shame and gain honesty. Indeed, Callicles expounded a number of propositions foundational to the theory of will to power. He elaborated what could reasonably be called a ‘genealogy of morals,’ in Nietzsche’s sense. Callicles performed a reevaluation of all values. He envisioned new barbarians, a new nobility of tyrants, perhaps even a master race. — But we must not get ahead of ourselves. Though we must cover a great deal of ground, we should proceed one step at a time.

Once Callicles declared his honesty, he delivered a series of aristocratic value identifications. He identified the good with power, which means strength. “Please make your distinction clear,” demanded Socrates, “whether you consider the more powerful, the better, and the stronger as the same thing or different.” To which Callicles responded, “Well, I can plainly assure you that they are the same.” (*Gorgias* 488d) The good, so to speak, is power. Callicles believed that all beings in nature struggle for power. Each individual human being, as a creature of nature, struggles for its own power. Society and all its laws are matters of power. Morality and all its judgments are matters of power alone, as well. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra proclaimed, “Where I found the living, there I found will to power; and even in the will of those who serve I found the will to be master.” (*Zarathustra* “On Self-Overcoming”) Let’s call this the *principle of immorality*, for convenience, since a theory of power alone seems to overthrow common morality. Then we may say that Callicles and Zarathustra shared this principle of immorality. Indeed it cannot be overstated for our purposes that the rhetoric of *strong* and *weak* is the prominent feature of both Calliclesian and Zarathustran rhetoric. Callicles directly influenced Nietzsche with such rhetoric, and the latter passed it along to the spokesmen of the Third Reich inadvertently, as E.R. Dodds observed. Being unashamed means speaking the truth of power relations instead of Forms or Ideals, for Callicles and Zarathustra. As if calling back to an age of brute power, Zarathustra spoke, “O blessed remote time when a people would say to itself, ‘I want to be *master* — over peoples.’ For, my brothers, the best should rule, the best also want to rule. And where the doctrine is different, there the best is *lacking*.” (*Zarathustra* “On Old and New Tablets” 21). Though Callicles created a rhetoric of strong and weak, a rhetoric of power in short, he had considerable difficulty spelling out exactly whom he meant by the “strong.” Socrates asked him, “By whom do you mean ‘the better’?” To which Callicles replied, “I mean the nobler.” Socrates suggested, “...you mean the wiser or some other class?” Callicles agreed. “By heaven I do mean those...for justice I consider

to be this, that the better and wiser man should rule over and have more than the inferior.” (*Gorgias* 490e-491a) Further clarifying his vague notion, Callicles declared, “First of all I mean by the more powerful, not cobblers or cooks, but those who are wise in affairs of the state and the best methods of administering it, and not only wise but courageous, being competent to accomplish their intentions and not flagging through weakness of soul.” (*Gorgias* 491a-b)

This quotation sounds rather neutral and antiseptic, but Polus had already defined tyranny as “to be at liberty to do what I please in the state — to kill, to exile, and to follow my own pleasure in every act.” (*Gorgias* 469c) And Callicles did not revise or reject the image. So we must conclude that Callicles thought of the strong as *successful practicing tyrants*. In his honesty, Callicles held that all human beings understand that power is the only good. And everyone understands that injustice toward others is the only true virtue. Further, everyone understands that the unjust man is the happy man, while the man of justice must be an unhappy man. Everyone understands such things, including the power-weaklings. So they invert the entire truth for their own protection. They devise a universal morality and a political state to enforce it. They understand that without the force of law and legal punishment, everyone would act unjustly toward everyone else. So the weaklings use *shame*; they censor the universally recognized facts about power. Instead they teach that everyone seeks the good! Callicles declared,

But in my opinion those who framed the laws are the weaker folk, the majority. And accordingly they frame the laws for themselves and their own advantage, and so too with their approval and censure, and to prevent the stronger who are able to overreach them from gaining the advantage over them, they frighten them by saying that to overreach others is shameful and evil, and injustice consists in seeking an advantage over others. For they are satisfied, I suppose, if being inferior they enjoy equality of status. That is the reason why seeking advantage over the many is by convention said to be wrong and shameful, and they call it injustice. (*Gorgias* 483b-c)

The weaklings equate power with evil. But Callicles and others who have overcome their shame restore the real truths about power relations. The unashamed teach the will to power, and nothing else. Callicles took power to mean brute tyranny, however

neutrally he described it. And he seemed to believe that every man had the desire to be tyrant operative in him. (It is a pet belief of Callicles that egalitarian forms of government are only disguised forms of tyranny against the strong. This is the point of Zarathustra's speech "On the Tarantulas" and a comparison warrants a separate essay.) Even more, that life itself is one great struggle for power.

Uninterested in shame, Socrates admired the young man's honesty. "You make a brave attack, Callicles, with so frank an outburst, for clearly you are now saying what others may think but are reluctant to express. (*Gorgias* 492d)

Having now seen how Callicles and Zarathustra accepted the principle of immoralism, it should be noted well that they differ on a fundamental interpretation of the principle. As an immoralist, Callicles is a hedonist. He was consequently a petty tyrant. Callicles identified power with power over objects of desire. He sought to inflame and enjoy his passions at a rather base level. In strong contrast stands Zarathustra, who does not debase the passions, quite the opposite. But he does not identify power with a crude control over objects of desire. Zarathustra was not the man who maximizes satisfaction of lust and wantonness, but one who loves fate, affirms the eternal recurrence of the same, lower types. Zarathustra was the man of affirmative force and active will to power. Callicles was in the order of a petty tyrant like Archelaus. Callicles was driven by lust; he identified power with satisfaction. Psychologically, he was a rather simple man with simple desires. Zarathustra shared the rhetoric of Callicles to a surprising extent, but for far more complex reasons than passion. Zarathustra at least had introduced the ideal of the *Übermensch*, and if Callicles is a *hedonistic immoralist*, Zarathustra is something of an *idealistic immoralist*, despite his certain disdain for the term.

4. Genealogy of Morals

We have seen that when Callicles rejected a sense of shame and instead told his own beliefs, he created a rhetoric of power exceptionally prophetic of Nietzsche's theory of will to power. In both forms of rhetoric, the terms *strong* and *weak* held central importance. What we shall now discover is that Callicles distinguished between moralities of the weak versus moralities of the strong, in a theory very similar to Nietzsche's genealogy of morals. To fully appreciate how closely Callicles approximated Nietzsche's position, let's review Nietzsche's genealogy of morals briefly. Consider master morality first. This is the sort of morality we should expect to find

within an aristocratic group. Master morality rests in what Nietzsche called the *aristocratic value equations*. (GM I 7)

Good¹ man = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = beloved by God.

Bad man = low = common = unhappy = pitiable.

Nietzsche's analysis claims that the aristocratic master first judges himself as 'good' by seeing the positive qualities in his own life. The master values power, wealth, happiness and blessings from God or the gods. Only secondarily does he form the concept 'bad' by noting the absence of his own qualities. A 'bad' person or a 'bad' life is simply the absence of the good. Nietzsche saw the difference as the master's reflection on the power relations underlying 'good' and 'bad.' It is good to have power, bad to be powerless. This is the moral manner in which the powerful think: it is "master morality." In contrast, "slave morality" is any set of moral judgments and concepts that are based in the *slave value equations*. (GM I 10)

Good¹ man = Evil man = noble = powerful = conqueror.

Good² man = low = common = poor = powerless.

The slave moralist judges the powerful person first, before himself and equates the powerful person with evil. The slave moralist condemns the powerful person and only secondarily judges himself as 'good².' He sees himself as good only in the absence of traits of the powerful. Notice he believes that God does not bless the evil powerful man. God blesses the powerless, poor and unhappy man. The slave moralist has reversed, or inverted, the judgments of the master moralist. Nietzsche called this the "slave revolt in morality." Obviously, slave morality is still a reflection on power relations. It is any morality that resents, or rebels against, master morality. Slave morality condemns worldly success and power, so Nietzsche's Zarathustra called it "anti-worldly." Since it

resents the power relations of the world, but insists on justice, it must teach that justice occurs in an afterlife. Slave morality teaches that justice does not occur in this world, and so must occur at the hands of a god that agrees with this morality. He sends the powerful, happy successful masters to Hell and rewards the unhappy, powerless man in Heaven. And so Nietzsche's Zarathustra also called it "otherworldly." Slave morality includes the dominant moralities and religions of the modern and traditional world: democracy, socialism, liberalism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and others. The vast majority of human beings have subscribed to some version of "slave morality." Master morality would include many of the moral systems created by powerful ruling groups; aristocracy, monarchy, and capitalism, but also worldly sensual ethics such as hedonism, eudemonism, and aestheticism. Master morality emphasizes the goodness of pleasure, happiness, and beauty, and thus the goodness of the human body. Slave morality tends to devalue the human body, which it views as a source of sin and suffering.

According to Nietzsche, the highest form of will to power is the human will to knowledge. It goes beyond good² and evil, but also beyond good¹ and bad. It seeks to understand and know and embrace the world as it really is. This will to knowledge discovers that the world repeats itself over and over again precisely as it had occurred previously. He called it "eternal return of the same." Only the strongest type of person could accept and affirm that the entire universe will play itself out evermore. He called this type the "Übermensch."

After a review of Nietzsche's genealogy of morals, we may view Callicles rather precisely. Callicles endorsed an aristocratic master morality, though one of a hedonistic sort. Callicles said,

...the naturally noble and just is what I now describe to you with all frankness—namely that anyone who is to live aright should suffer his appetites to grow to the greatest extent and not check them, and through courage and intelligence should be competent to minister to them at their greatest and to satisfy every appetite with what it craves ... [T]he many ... blame such men through a sense of shame to conceal their own impotence, and ... they claim that intemperance is shameful and they make slaves of those who are naturally better ... [T]hey are led by their own cowardice to praise temperance and justice ... [W]hat in truth could be worse and more shameful than temperance and justice? ... Luxury and

intemperance and license, when they have sufficient backing, are virtue and happiness, and all the rest is tinsel, the unnatural catchwords of mankind, mere nonsense and of no account. (*Gorgias* 491e-492c)

There is a certain *natural morality* that identifies,

Nobility = justice = voraciousness = courage = intelligence = competence.

It may be easily interpreted as an aristocratic value equation, or master morality. Callicles distinguished from it a certain *conventional morality* that identifies,

Powerful = shameful = intemperate = injustice.

The latter may be seen as a slave value equation, or slave morality. The final sentence of the quotation above is, in my opinion, a jewel of Calliclesian rhetoric, identifying

Virtue = happiness = luxury, intemperance, and license.

His description of slave morality as a whole is noteworthy. Clearly, virtues arise out of power relations, and the perspective on goodness or anything else results from a specific power relation.

Interestingly, Callicles made clear that the inferiors remain content to be granted equal *status* (not real equality). So it is a social convention, again, not an adjustment of power relations in nature that makes an inferior an 'equal.' As long as the convention is observed, there exists a compromise solution. *But when the rhetoric of shame has been dismissed, and the inequality of men frankly asserted publicly, the compensation goes lost, and the natural relations of power are restored. This occurrence shocks and disorients, as well as maddens, the inferior people. A sudden loss of shame and the voicing of unspoken truths activates other superiors by justifying their will to power anew, and by flattering*

those already in love with power by implying possibilities of absolute rule. This raises the specter of a master revolt in morals, which is to say a revolution by aristocratic types against democratic government, and one likely resulting in a tyranny.

When Callicles apparently began publicly proclaiming his interest in tyranny and enslavement, he did not submit to the angry cries of the democratic masses; thus his rhetoric likely created considerable danger for him. Callicles clearly believed a slave is sub-human and its life worthless and meaningless. “For to suffer wrong is not even fit for a man but only for a slave, for whom it is better to be dead than alive, since when wronged and outraged he is unable to help himself or any other for whom he cares.” (*Gorgias* 483ab)

Callicles was mortified at one point in the debate when Socrates inferred that the former would have to imitate the very democrats he abhorred. If Callicles wants power in Athens, he must do the bidding of the Athenian democracy. “You must not be a mere imitator, but must bear a natural resemblance, if you are to effect a genuine friendship with the Athenian demos, yes, and, by heaven, the Demos of Pnylamps as well.” (*Gorgias* 513b) Callicles could not refute the argument but replied only, “I feel as the many do. I am not quite convinced by you.” Socrates in turn responded by saying the reluctance of Callicles was due to the latter’s “love of demos,” which is really only a love of power (as Dodds repeatedly observed). To gain power, Callicles would have to become the mob’s mouthpiece. He would have to become a demagogue on behalf of the People he hates. This is something most repulsive to Zarathustra: “What hates the mob’s consumptive lap dogs and all the degenerate dejected riff-raff— praised be this spirit of all free spirits, the laughing storm that blows dust into the eyes of all the dim-sighted, the festering wounded.” (*Zarathustra* “On Higher Man” 20 mine). Callicles would have to become one of “the mob’s consumptive lap dogs” to rule Athens. But Callicles prides himself precisely on his honesty and shamelessness. How could he court the Athenian democracy while hating it without shameful deceit? —This raises an odd question. Callicles had no rank in the army, no career, no reputation, and his money came from his family. *So what was he thinking about as a strategy other than flattering the masses?* — Zarathustra need not follow Callicles in imitation of dictatorship, because he does not seek political favor. Zarathustra seeks only a cultural, intellectual, spiritual leadership that he need not negotiate. He needs only to promote his Grosspolitik. He needs only the intellectual power necessary to topple the idols of the species and set up his Übermensch.

Clearly, Callicles was anti-democratic in his genealogy and reevaluation of morals. His distinction between *nomos* (convention) and *physis* (nature), and his consequent rejection of social contract theory, further characterize him as an anti-democrat.

5. Argument for tyranny: *Nomos v. physis*

“Neither Gorgias nor Polus had the courage of his convictions, and they could therefore be overthrown by a relatively superficial dialectic,” observed Dodds. “Callicles brings into the field a fresh weapon of formidable destructive power, the distinction between νόμος and φύσις.” (Dodds 263) Callicles inferred that man in a state of nature, without any conventions of civilized life, is morally better than the man living under unnatural conventions, especially conventional morality. Callicles favored the law of nature (φύσις, *physis*) over convention (νόμος, *nomos*). Dodds traced the distinction back to Antiphon and Hippias, but the developed position of Callicles goes “beyond anything known to have been maintained by Hippias or Antiphon, the two best known champions of φύσις.” (Dodds 263) By drawing his distinction between φύσις and νόμος, Callicles could accuse Socrates of equivocating on two different senses of the word ‘good,’ and similar terms. “For, Socrates, though you claim to pursue the truth, you actually drag us into these tiresome popular fallacies, looking into what is fine and noble, not by nature, but by convention. Now for the most part, these two, nature and convention, are antagonistic to each other.” (*Gorgias* 482e) The validity of Callicles’ argument for tyranny depends on this distinction. So his first premise is: What is right by nature may be wrong by convention, and vice-versa. What nature considers right is strength, pure and simple. In turn, he supports this premise by observation, that is, empirical confirmation.

But in my view nature herself makes it plain that it is right for the better to have the advantage over the worse, the more able over the less. And both among all animals and in entire states and races of mankind it is plain that this is the case—that right is recognized to be the sovereignty and advantage of the stronger over the weaker. (*Gorgias* 483cd)

The wording and content of this passage qualify it as another example of the most typical Calliclesian rhetoric, and we will return to it later. But here we notice only that Callicles believed in a law of nature whose edict was the identity between right and

might. Right is might: This is his second premise. And so those who use might are right, regardless of what convention says. With reference to Xerxes, Darius, and other tyrants, Callicles said, “But I imagine that these men act in accordance with the true nature of right, yes, and, by heaven, according to nature’s own law, though not perhaps by the law we frame.” (*Gorgias* 483e) Callicles distinguished clearly between what he called ‘*natural justice*’ and conventional justice. Socrates asked whether ‘natural justice’ means “the more powerful carries off by force the property of the weaker, the better rules over the worse, and the nobler takes more than the meaner.” To which Callicles responded, “That is what I said then and still hold to.” (*Gorgias* 488b) Natural law dictates the survival of the strongest. In comparison, conventional law is meaningless to Callicles. “Do you think I mean that, if a rabble of slaves and nondescripts who are of no earthly use except for their bodily strength are gathered together and make some pronouncement, this is law?” (*Gorgias* 489bc) This passage, noteworthy for its rhetoric, clearly rejects the validity of conventional, man-made laws. They result merely from a social contract (cf. *Gorgias* 492c7, συνθήματα) made among the inferiors only; this was a position also held by Glaucon. Dodds traced the idea of a social contract back farther to Critias. But Callicles was his own thinker.

Callicles’ coinage is not to be confused either with ‘natural law’ in the Stoic sense (the term seems to be first used in this way by Aristotle ...) or with the modern scientists’ ‘laws of Nature,’ which are simply observed uniformities. Callicles’ ‘law of Nature’ is not a generalization about Nature but a rule of conduct based on the analogy of ‘natural’ behavior...As Socrates shows later, it amounts in practice to domination by instinctive appetites. (Dodds 268)

These ideas closely resemble signature notions from Nietzsche. Nietzsche accepted the distinction between civilization and lawless nature, as found in social contract theory, but took the immoralist position of favoring life as natural man over domesticated man in civilization. He felt himself happier, more natural, and stronger in a ‘state of nature,’ as Hobbes and Plato conceived of it (but rejected it). Civilization and the political state are not matters of social contract at all; they are matters of power relations. Zarathustra declared to his students,

Human society is a trial: thus I teach it — a long trial; and what it tries to find is the commander. A trial, O my brothers, and *not* a ‘contract.’ Break, break this word of the soft-hearted and half-and-half. (*Zarathustra* “On the Thousand and One Goals” 25).

If the “commander” here is comparable at all to a tyrant, then Zarathustra shares a view of nature, society, and the individual consistent with the beliefs of Callicles. Mankind is not improved by laws and government; the only way to improve mankind is by employment of its passions. “Once you suffered passions and called them evil,” said Zarathustra to one of his brothers in a new nobility. “But now you have only your virtues left: they grew out of your passions.” (*Zarathustra* “On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions” 36).

Socrates argued that there must exist not only a good will but also an art of doing the good, if one is to avoid being wronged. There must be a “certain power and art” to defending oneself against wrong-doing. He then asked Callicles, “Now what is the art of contriving to suffer no wrong or as little as possible? ... You must either be yourself the ruling power or even a tyrant in your city, or else a partisan of the government in power.” Callicles enthusiastically agreed, saying “now I think you have said something really excellent.” (510a) The third premise of his implicit argument for tyranny, then, would be: The art of contriving to suffer no wrong or as little as possible, is to be yourself the ruling power or even a tyrant in your city. Of course Socrates disagreed. For him, it is always wrong to do wrong, even in self-defense. And it is worse to do wrong than to be wronged. These are propositions that Socrates could not be shaken from. So Callicles would need a fourth premise; it is worse to be wronged than to wrong someone else. With these four premises, Callicles could draw his conclusion: Right is to become the ruling power or even the tyrant of one’s city.

6. The New Nobility

Plato versus Homer: has Nietzsche been understood? In Nietzsche’s estimation, Plato was the antipode of Homer, for Homer represented the old Hellene, the man of instincts. He was the tragic poet who reported the stories of men near full of instinct and disdainful toward reason. In stark contrast, Plato was the idealist who battled the instincts in the fashion of Socrates and who distrusted the poets. He criticized and

censured Homer, whose two epic poems present us with the best description of the proto-Hellenic spirit. This alone shows how anti-Hellenic was Plato. Likewise, Callicles and Nietzsche represent cultural throw-backs to an earlier, less civilized way of thinking among the early Greeks. It seems this includes a tyrannical mode of thinking. Certainly, Zarathustra is repeatedly described by Nietzsche as the freest of all free spirits. And Zarathustra gave a chilling description of the proto-tyrant. “A great despot might come along, a shrewd monster who, according to his pleasure and displeasure, might constrain and strain all that is past till it becomes a bridge to him, a harbinger and herald and cockcrow.” But Zarathustra challenged precisely this figure in a manner that still proved aristocratic and fundamentally anti-democratic. “Therefore, my brothers, a *new nobility* is needed to be the adversary of all rabble and of all that is despotic and to write anew upon new tablets the word ‘noble’. For many who are noble are needed, and noble men of many kinds, that there may be a nobility.” (*Zarathustra*, “On Old and New Tablets” 11) Zarathustra opposed the hedonistic despot like Callicles, since he has no higher redemption, like the *Übermensch*. But will not Zarathustra’s own nobility have to defend themselves and foil enemies? Is this what is meant by “of many kinds”? Will it not require a commander, as the whole trial of life demands? Zarathustra as tyrant would put mankind under his yoke. “Only the yoke for the thousand necks is still lacking: the one goal is lacking.” (*Zarathustra* “On the Thousand and One Goals”) And since Nature turns out to be a vast set of power relations, by analogy should we not practice violence, as Callicles had inferred? “Brave, unconcerned, mocking, violent—thus wisdom wants us: she is a woman and always loves only a warrior.” (*Zarathustra* “On Reading and Writing”) This sounds very much like Callicles; brave enough to speak his mind; unconcerned about the mob who would shame him; mocking in his pathos of distance; violent as it suits him. The new nobility must harden themselves so that they may strike mankind like a blade.

And if your hardness does not wish to flash and cut and cut through, how can you one day create with me? For creators are hard. And it must seem blessedness to you to impress your hand as on wax ... This new tablet, O my brothers, I place over you: become hard! (*Zarathustra*, “On Old and New Tablets” 29)

Remember, Calicles was a hedonist and petty type of would-be tyrant, but he might be just as lethal as a genocidal maniac, potentially. The logic of Calicles could lead to desiring the *complete elimination* of one's enemies, in the fashion of Mussolini or Hitler, though he did not follow it to the ultimate conclusion. In *Gorgias* 483c-d, quoted previously, Calicles seemed to consider entire nations and races as stronger or weaker. Is there a 'master race'? If all other nations and races must be ruled by the tyrant for his own protection, then does not the principle of immorality, which apparently has no natural limits, require the tyrant to wage a war of himself against all others, especially other nations or races? Is this the project of putting a yoke on the thousand necks? Zarathustra seemed to reject the will to completely annihilate his foes, since this would be negative force and reactive will. The Übermensch would use man as a means to himself. Of course the goal of Zarathustran tyranny, or will to tyranny, is acceptance of the eternal return of the lower type. He learned to affirm the inevitability of the weak, and even the eventual triumph of the smaller type. But perhaps he needed to accept such a thing only as the realization that the foes cannot be completely eliminated. Zarathustra certainly expressed the desire to eliminate the herd.

O my brothers, am I cruel? But I say: what is falling, we should still push. Everything today falls and decays: who would check it? But I — I even want to push it ... I am a prelude of better players, O my brothers! A precedent! Follow my precedent! And he whom you cannot teach to fly, teach to fall faster! (*Zarathustra* "On Old and New Tablets" 20)

But far more to the point: "Who represents the greatest danger for all of man's future? Is it not the good and the just? *Break, break the good and the just!* O my brothers, have you really understood this word?" (*Zarathustra* "On Old and New Tablets" 27)

7. The Master Revolt in Morals

Here is a difference, however, of no small consequence: *Calicles held that stronger types could rule again, in a sort of master revolt in morals reversing the slave revolt in morals, while Nietzsche believed that the weak would eventually win regardless of any temporary set-backs from stronger elements.* Calicles said,

We mold the best and strongest among ourselves, catching them young like lion cubs, and by spells and incantations we make slaves of them, saying that they must be content with equality and that this is what is right and fair. But if a man arises endowed with a nature sufficiently strong, he will, I believe, shake off all these controls, burst his fetters, and break loose. And trampling upon our scraps of paper, our spells and incantations, and all our unnatural conventions, he rises up and reveals himself our master who was once our slave, and there shines forth nature's true justice. (*Gorgias* 483e-484a)

This represents yet another jewel of oratory that Plato has put at Calicles' disposal, and one that is, perhaps, closest of all to Zarathustra's radical aristocratic style. Indeed, the passage could easily originate in Zarathustra, even if the reverse is closer to the truth. (Interestingly, Dodds identified the 'blond beast' in Nietzsche's works with the lion used in the metaphor here. If he is accurate, the laughing lions in *Zarathustra* "The Sign" are surely also allusions to Calicles and aristocratic radicals in general.) Though the rhetoric has a close family resemblance, the content contradicts the message of Zarathustra. Calicles is not saying that the triumph of the nobility is inevitable but only possible. I would interpret Nietzsche to rule out that possibility in the long-run, though not in the short-run. In an aphorism called "A Word in the Conservative's Ear," he wrote,

It is of no use: we *have* to go forwards i.e., *step by step further in décadence* (—this being *my* definition of modern 'progress' ...). You can *check* this development and, by checking it, dam up, accumulate degeneration itself, making it more vehement and *sudden*: no more can be done. (*Twilight* "Reconnaissance Raids of an Untimely Man" 43)

This seems to follow from what Zarathustra was told in a dream. "Wherever there is force, *number* will become mistress: she has more force." (*Zarathustra* "On the Three Evils" 1) It clearly takes a stance inconsistent with Calicles over the long-run.

Zarathustra nevertheless anticipated a war and warriors against the rabble. The higher man of Part IV, though, does not comprise these warriors. “You yourselves are not those to whom my heritage and name belong. ... [I]t is for those who are higher, stronger, more triumphant and more cheerful ... : *laughing lions* must come!” (*Zarathustra* “The Welcome”) These lions appear in Part IV’s “The Sign” and are called his “children.” They are warriors and advents of the Great Noon.

And since Socrates was a primary idol in *Twilight*, and since Nietzsche was untimely partly because he returned to Greek experience, including Callicles, this warning quote above from *Twilight* issued by an untimely man, though generalized, seems to address Callicles. Indeed, *Twilight* returned to the issues of most concern to Callicles that Nietzsche had worked through while still a philologist. “This is the great *uncanny* problem which I have been investigating the longest: the psychology of the ‘improvers’ of humanity,” including Plato (*Twilight* Improvers 5).

And it is *Twilight* that gives a crucial, even Archimedean, point from which to interpret the relation between Zarathustran rhetoric and tyranny. Is Zarathustra the freest spirit of all free spirits and anti-Tyrant par excellence, or is Zarathustran freedom the freedom to become a tyrant? In “My Idea of Freedom,” Nietzsche wrote,

For what is freedom! Having the will to be responsible to oneself. Maintaining the distance which divides us off from each other. Becoming more indifferent towards hardship, harshness, privation, even life itself. Being prepared to sacrifice people to one’s *cause*—oneself included. Freedom means that the manly instincts which delight in war and victory rule over other instincts, for example the instinct for ‘happiness.’ ... The highest type of free men would need to be sought in the place where the greatest resistance is constantly being overcome: a short step away from tyranny, right on the threshold of the danger of servitude. This is psychologically true, if one understands here by ‘tyrants’ pitiless and terrible instincts...and it is politically true, if one simply takes a walk through history ... *First* principle: you must need to be strong, or else you will never become it. — Those great hothouses for strong, for the strongest kind of people there has yet been—the aristocratic communities such as Rome and Venice—understood freedom in exactly the same sense as I understand the word freedom: as something which one can have and *not* have, which one can *want*, which one can *conquer*... (*Twilight* 38)

The Zarathustran type lives on the abyss between tyranny and servitude. This is surely where Callicles' lion cubs may be found. The rhetoric of the 'strong' is especially clear as a link to Callicles. What Nietzsche explicitly points out is that this is a real political principle and not only a psychological notion. And so the distance between Nietzsche as psychologist (and Zarathustra as 'only a poet') and Callicles the would-be tyrant nearly vanishes. An emphasis on the instinct for war supplants the hedonistic orientation of Callicles here. Nietzsche abandoned an entirely poetic stance and endorsed a literal tyranny. Nearby references to Caesar Borgia, Napoleon, Julius Caesar, and Machiavelli make the point more concrete.

The freest man lives "a short step away from tyranny," and his first principle is strength, of a sort associated with ancient tyranny of the rather primitive Callicles. This raises the question about freedom; how is it measured? The aphorism from *Twilight* provides an answer: "How is freedom measured, in individuals as well as nations? By the resistance which must be overcome, the effort it costs to stay *on top*." While a general approval of the agon may be included in the meaning here, Nietzsche specified a political meaning: reality is a war of all against all in which there exists only natural justice. Freedom is the natural liberty to do what one wants. This is all very closely associated with Callicles, not unintentionally or coincidentally. But another passage from *Twilight* "Raids" 38 turns to the struggle between liberal and "illiberal" forces that seems undeniably commenting on Callicles and the master revolt of morals symbolized by the lion cubs.

Liberal institutions stop being liberal as soon as they have been set up: afterwards there is no one more invertebrate or thorough in damaging freedom than liberal institutions. Now we know *what* they achieve: they undermine the will to power, they are the levelling of mountain and valley elevated to the status of morality, they make things petty, cowardly, and hedonistic — with them the herd animal triumphs every time. ... While these same institutions are still being fought for, they produce quite different effects: then they are actually powerful promoters of freedom. On closer inspection, it is war that produces these effects, war waged *for* liberal institutions, which as war allows the *illiberal* instincts to persist. (*Twilight* "Raids" 38)

Democracy itself snuffs out freedom, but in the struggle against democracy and its liberal institutions, the freest man gives full throttle to his tyrannical instincts. Ironically, the warrior spirit remains alive within the liberals while they struggle for their institutions. So the value of liberalism is that it allows the lion cubs of tyranny to conquer their freedom, to take the freedom of becoming what one is, a tyrant. Yes, the herd animal triumphs in the end, every time, but only by struggling against the captors can the lion cubs remain themselves. This is Nietzsche's final piece of advice to the Callicles-like tyrant; struggle to remain alive, though it is ultimately futile, and one will actualize the Übermensch. A final scene from *Zarathustra* will illustrate this teaching.

8. The Mysterious Youth on the Mountainside

Early in the work, Zarathustra came across a youth "bent and twisted" by the "invisible hands" of his own evil. In a parable, Zarathustra taught him, "It is with man as it is with the tree. The more he aspires to the height and light, the more strongly do his roots strive earthward, downward, into the dark, the deep — into evil." (*Zarathustra* "On the Tree on the Mountainside) This is the cost of conquering freedom; one must struggle to remain on top, as Nietzsche had put it in *Twilight*, by what others call 'evil.' This youth is rather mysterious; the students of Zarathustra, his 'brothers,' become the Higher Man of Part IV, collectively, minus the 'apostates.' But this youth is not one of them. This is the only time he and Zarathustra meet. Yet he seems to be an inner self, or an earlier self, of Zarathustra. The youth bares his own soul in a most interesting way.

I no longer trust myself since I aspire to the height, and nobody trusts me anymore; how did this happen? I change too fast: my today refutes my yesterday. I often skip steps when I climb: no step forgives me that. When I am at the top I always find myself alone. Nobody speaks to me; the frost of loneliness makes me shiver. (*Zarathustra* "On the Tree on the Mountainside)

The youth is one who wills to be "on top"; a tyrant. Very interesting is his comment that no one trusts him; this was one of Socrates' arguments. Socrates had easily showed that the tyrant could become friends with neither inferiors nor superiors; he could not

have friends or a close inner circle. Zarathustra said explicitly, “Are you a slave? Then you cannot be a friend. Are you a tyrant? Then you cannot have friends.” (*Zarathustra* “On the Friend”) The rhetoric very closely parallels that of Callicles in the *Gorgias*, to say the least. The youth on the mountainside is the tyrant who must sink ever deeper into evil in order to skip steps to the heights. Callicles called it “overreaching” others. They are kindred spirits in the rhetoric of tyranny. Zarathustra analyzed the youth’s psyche.

You aspire to the free heights, your soul thirsts for the stars. But your wicked instincts, too, thirst for freedom. Your wild dogs want freedom; they bark with joy from their cellar when your spirit plans to open all prisons. To me you are still a prisoner who is plotting his freedom: alas, in such prisoners the soul becomes clever, but also deceitful and bad. (*Zarathustra* “On the Tree on the Mountainside”)

The youth is Callicles, or his avatar, imprisoned in liberal democratic institutions, still unable to express his full illiberal power. He is the man of instinct, the Homeric type of warrior, the Hellene of the agon. He is a lion’s cub. Precisely as with Callicles, the youth has violated the taboo of shame and has rejected equality. This breach of egalitarian rhetoric must draw extreme censorship from the inferiors. Zarathustra thus said, “You still feel noble, and the others too feel your nobility, though they bear you a grudge and send evil glances.” (Ibid) And then as if to the hedonistic would-be tyrant Callicles, Zarathustra lamented, “Alas, I knew noble men who lost their highest hope. Then they slandered all high hopes. Then they lived impudently in brief pleasures and barely cast their goals beyond the day... Do not throw away the hero in your soul! Hold high your highest hope! Thus spoke Zarathustra.” (*Zarathustra* “On the Tree on the Mountainside”) The youth still lacked devotion to the *Übermensch*, as had Callicles. But Zarathustra urged him on to the struggle against the captors and their liberal institutions.

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Final Note.

This essay represents a radical reevaluation of Nietzsche's politics as I have previously interpreted it.

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